

Relationships and Social Capital: Exploring the Educational Success of First-Generation Postgraduate Students in the UK

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Abstract

The expansion of higher education in the UK and more widely has resulted in more people attending university, but inequalities remain; for instance, whether a parent has been to university is still a crucial predictor of progression to university. There have been modest increases in the participation of 'first-generation students' (the first in the family to attend university). Still, a key theme in the research literature suggests that potential first-generation students and other groups targeted by the widening participation agenda tend to lack the necessary experiences, knowledge, and relationships for successful progression to and through higher education compared to those for whom university participation is common in their family history. Some of the relevant research explores first-generation participation through the Bourdieusian lens. In other words, these studies tend to examine the discontinuities in forms of capital between formal educational contexts and families with no higher education experiences. Such an approach sometimes can veer towards deficit discourses about families with little higher education experience and can be overly deterministic, struggling to explain how some first-generation students are successful in higher education. My research tries to resist such deficit discourses and, perhaps uniquely for UK research, explores the experiences and accounts of first-generation students who have not only succeeded in accessing university and then graduating with undergraduate degrees but have continued to postgraduate study at master's and doctoral level. The thesis seeks to learn directly from these unusual cases about how they explain and account for their educational journeys from childhood onwards. This research examines how first-generation students understand and utilise their capital resources and explores the mechanisms that enable participation and success in this environment. I conducted thirty semi-structured, qualitative, biographical interviews with first-generation postgraduate research students who, by definition, are successful in the higher education context. The interviews were conducted at a post-1992 university in the North of England, and the participant accounts were explored through theoretical thematic analysis – using capital theory - and narrative constructions. The thesis contributes to the field in the following ways: it centres on postgraduate students in a field which overwhelmingly takes undergraduates as the focus; it outlines why 'first-generation' status should be defined in a way that includes their siblings, not just parents; it details the meaning and role of 'support' in encouraging educational participation and in facilitating the exchange of capital; it illustrates the value of a longer-term perspective on understanding the dynamic nature of successful educational journeys; and it shows that capital is contextual and that 'critical moments' can serve as opportunities for individuals to use capital effectively. To my knowledge, this approach has not been explored elsewhere in the literature. The participants in this research revealed that

their accumulated social capital enabled successful educational trajectories. From formative parental relations that positioned education as a valuable pursuit to generative ties with peers, teachers, and partners that expanded aspirations and opportunities, these first-generation students leveraged their relationships to propel them into and through higher education. My findings further suggest that tensions can arise when transitioning to postgraduate study as their experiences and parents' expectations can become misaligned. Nevertheless, their accumulated capital enabled them to be committed and agentic in their continued, longer-term educational pursuits (while recognising their new, unique position within the family). I conclude that these relationships, or social capital networks, are crucial for those from families where cultural capital in the form of a degree is not available. Finally, I recommend that educational policies and institutions consider these relationships as facilitative mechanisms when addressing equity issues of access and success in higher education.

Keywords: first-generation, capital, biographical, success, higher education, postgraduate

Prologue

I first encountered sociology in a college prospectus when considering which A Levels I would study. What drew me in was the blurb, which described sociology as understanding how different groups of people experience the world differently. I recall this so vividly because I still use this exact phrase when explaining my area of research to my family and non-academic friends. Of course, sociology is about much more than this. Still, after others' misunderstandings that I was training to be a social worker or to read people's minds, I felt that it offered a certain simplicity. From there, I embarked on an educational journey which helped me reflect on my own experiences and to understand how broader historical, political, and social contexts have shaped them. I also came to see how there were several subjective and theoretical positions to explain any single phenomenon. Therefore, this prologue aims to outline the genesis of my perspective on my research topic so that the reader can better situate the remainder of this thesis in that position.

My pursuit of education has been about accumulating knowledge and personal growth. My mother and grandmothers all attended grammar schools to obtain O Levels, then left education to be homemakers alongside casual employment (grandmothers) or on to post-school training schemes (mother). My mother and grandmothers supported my educational progression, even during later years when they had limited knowledge of the environment or the subjects at hand. Their willingness to accept and encourage something that they did not understand has underwritten my sense of freedom in exploring education as I have. My father and grandfathers left school as soon as possible to enter the prevalent types of manual employment at the time. My older brother followed a similar pattern, leaving education at 16 to commence apprenticeship training. I remember little of discussing early schooling with my father and grandfathers, but in making my post-16 decisions, there was a sense that, to them, education was merely a means to an end rather than an end in and of itself.

During my bachelor's and master's degrees, I understood more about society's unequal distribution of wealth and other resources. This led me to consider how my background and upbringing had influenced my decisions about my education and future aspirations. Learning and achieving good grades had been something that felt unproblematic to me throughout my schooling. However, my transition to university was challenging. I enrolled at a highly-ranked university where I felt uncertain about everything, where I did not understand the language that was used, and where I felt that everyone else knew more than me. I questioned why I found the university environment so hard when I was from a background with a strong work ethic and academic capability – assets that should be valued in this environment. It was not

until I was deep into my master's dissertation that I realised, at least in part, that it was to do with being the first in my family to enter this unfamiliar environment. Unlike many of my peers, I had no one to teach me how to get by.

This furthered my interest in the area, but I often found it frustrating to see how people from a similar background to me were described as deficient or lacking in the things they needed to achieve in education. This is not to undermine others' research who have set out to identify the barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education and who have suggested solutions to overcome and remove these barriers. This research has been crucial in addressing some of the obstacles that many students face and has provided the foundation on which my research is built. However, existing research sometimes maintained the deficit discourse that university was only for a certain kind of person. As such, I wanted to add another voice to the research field that foregrounded educational *success* and asked questions highlighting the myriad ways that students who were the first in their families to go to university could participate successfully in the academic environment.

What struck me when exploring the literature on first-generation students (I will describe more exactly what I mean by this term in Chapter One) was, firstly, the multiple definitions associated with the group, and secondly, that much of the literature does not focus explicitly or solely on this social category but instead focuses on broader notions of social class (e.g. working-class students in higher education) or all those grouped under the 'widening participation' banner. Whilst this does include first-generation students, they were often conflated with other measures of disadvantage. One of the big debates I have grappled with throughout my research journey has been to what extent this thesis is 'about' social class. Indeed, I reflected on my own background and tried to understand exactly which social class I belonged to. I struggled. What measure should I use? Which point of my life course should I use to make the assessment? Are my family working-class? Upper working-class? Am I still working-class? I ended up with more questions than I had answers. Undoubtedly, class matters in understanding educational success, as does gender and ethnicity; however, I carefully considered whether pre-determined stratifications and classifications would be a helpful way to meet the aims of my research project.

Several other inequality measures became apparent during the initial stages of my research. As well as social class, the research literature discussed 'socioeconomic status', 'low participation neighbourhoods', 'type of school attended', 'provision of free school meals', and several more general terms, including 'disadvantaged', 'less privileged', and 'non-traditional'. Separating these inequality indicators was impossible, and the literature search became a morass. Of course, many of these indicators/terms are proxies for social class. To me,

though, 'first-generation status' did not map neatly or perfectly onto social class (i.e., 'first-generation student' does not equal 'working-class'), and what became apparent was that whilst social class distinctions are undoubtedly important, what matters here is the meaning underneath, what it means to be a first-generation student needed to be foregrounded. Or, putting it another way, I wanted to explore the experiences of first-generation students *directly* and not presume from the outset that these were determined by or wholly condition by class position. As I commenced data collection, I began to understand more fully the complexity of the first-generation experience and the multiplicity of ways they were enabled to participate in education. Through their stories, I understood the relationships and resources they could draw upon in their educational journeys. As such, I felt that concentrating too much on labels of social class would detract from the meaning underneath experiences in terms of the mechanisms that enable successful participation in education for this group.

Initially, I considered conducting a longitudinal study with undergraduate students during their university experience to understand how they overcame barriers and continued to complete their studies. Whilst this would have been a worthy project, I reflected on whether I could fully understand their experiences without exploring the broader context of their historical biographies pre-university. In addition, during early conversations with my supervisors, we explored the notion of the expansion of higher education and that many more people from 'non-traditional backgrounds' were now accessing it. This was reflected in the burgeoning literature about undergraduates, inequality, and university access and experience. We considered whether 'the goalposts had moved', with unequal access becoming most prevalent and more obvious in the transition to postgraduate study (rather than to undergraduate study). The decision to focus on postgraduate students arose through reflecting on this conversation. This might be a more novel approach, adding to the existing literature. Reflecting on the biographies of first-generation postgraduate students could potentially allow insight into how their participation and engagement in their *lifetime* education enabled them to continue to this higher-level study. The decision to use a biographical approach to interviewing postgraduate students was a crucial shift in my research project's development and one which aligned with my stance as a critical realist.

At the outset of this PhD journey, I considered myself to be in a legitimate and advantageous position to research this area; I was a first-generation student researching first-generation students. Furthermore, I was a postgraduate (PhD) researcher researching postgraduate researchers, and I felt this shared understanding would benefit my project. I was known to most of my participants, and I felt that this familiarity would be a precursor to the scales tipping to the side of being an 'insider' in the research. However, as a staff member at the

same university (I was and am employed as an administrator), I also considered that there may be some power dynamics at play which would simultaneously make me an 'outsider' to the student participants. During the data collection phase, there was a sense of "we are all in this together" amongst the postgraduate researcher community; we encouraged each other's development and shared our doctoral wins and losses. Yet, as a staff member, I was always conscious of a professional boundary between us, a boundary where I was first and foremost part of their student support mechanism. I found myself in a constant state of flux and having to navigate the boundaries between 'fellow researcher' and 'supportive staff member' daily (I discuss this more fully in Chapter Four).

As my research progressed, I reflected on how our first-generation experiences compared. I was left wondering whether the insider-outsider status binary was a naïve way of understanding the interactions, similarities, and differences between the researcher and the researched. There were plenty of times when I felt a distinct *likeness* to my participants. Some of their shared stories and experiences resonated with me, and some brought back memories long since forgotten. Yet, I became more aware of the differences, how I was *unlike* my participants, and how the stories behind being 'first-generation' were diverse and complex. I had different experiences from those with a socioeconomically more or less advantaged upbringing. As someone from a White British ethnic background, I was unfamiliar with the culture of Black Caribbean family life. As a woman, I was an outsider to the school-based bravado experienced by some male participants. As someone in their late twenties (at the time of interviewing), I was from a different generation than many (who were younger or older than me). As someone with no caring responsibilities for children or elderly parents, I was unfamiliar with the careful negotiations in balancing family life and educational pursuits. As a heterosexual, I did not need to navigate the same discrimination faced by one openly homosexual participant. In some ways, our experiences were similar, but in many ways, they were not.

By the latter stages of my research journey, I concluded that my position in relation to my participants was fluid and multi-faceted; there were so many features of our lives that complicated the dichotomous nature of insider-outsider status. I found that these positions were not mutually exclusive but, perhaps, a continuum on which I moved between being an insider and an outsider, often landing somewhere in between. Within each interaction, my position shifted one way and then the other as I navigated the boundaries of professionalism, student and social identities, cultural experiences, and the associated similarities and differences that came with each participant. On the one hand, I felt points of connection and familiarity with my participants, but there were also moments to the contrary. On the other hand, their perspective may have differed, identifying with *me* more or less in

any given interaction. Such reflections have remained at the forefront of my consciousness during this research journey as I was cautious of not letting my feelings of similarity overshadow the research process and, thus, the differences being ignored.

This brief prologue has, I hope, allowed readers some understanding of 'where I am coming from' (biographically and in terms of my motives for this research). The discussion has touched on themes, topics and debates - for instance, about dimensions of social class and other inequalities and differences, about how we best categorise experiences, about a biographical perspective and what being an insider means, about the changing dynamics and landscapes of UK higher education - that are examined more closely in the coming chapters. Including my own reflections on my educational journey in this prologue has allowed me to acknowledge my position and offer reciprocity with my participants, who shared their stories with such sincerity and openness.

1. Chapter One - Starting Points: Contextualising the Research Focus

This thesis explores the experiences of a group of postgraduate research students who were the first in their families to enter higher education. The research focuses on their stories of success and how they came to be where they are now rather than the experience of postgraduate study *per se*. These postgraduate research students, by definition, have been successful in education, not only in accessing and succeeding in the undergraduate field but in navigating progression to the highest levels of study. Therefore, postgraduate study is used in this research as a proxy for educational success. This inquiry provides a greater understanding of their lifetime educational journeys and situates their experiences within the broader societal and educational context.

Postgraduate students who are the first in their families to enter higher education are under-researched, and studies using a long-term biographical perspective are rare. As such, the findings of this research offer a significant contribution, both in terms of understanding the participation of first-generation students and in terms of wider educational debates. In particular, this thesis illustrates the importance of supportive and meaningful relationships for enacting success in this environment. The aims of this research are:

- ❖ To explore how first-generation students navigate the educational environment;
- ❖ To identify the mechanisms that enable first-generation students to participate successfully in higher education; and
- ❖ To contribute to capital theory in the educational field.

In this introductory chapter, I begin to explain how these emerged and became central to my research (I explain this further in Chapter Three, where I assess the extant research literature). In this introduction, I will also contextualise the proceeding thesis and mark out space for my research within the higher education landscape. I will begin by offering an overview of the governmental policy debates regarding widening participation, the resulting changes to tuition fees, and the neoliberal influences impacting higher education institutions. This is important for understanding the political and policy landscape within which this research is conducted. Subsequently, I will discuss where my research fits into this landscape, define some of the key concepts used in this thesis, and highlight the gaps in knowledge that the research hopes to fill. Finally, I outline the structure of the remainder of the thesis that follows.

1.1. Contextualising Higher Education

Governments often position universities as places to promote social mobility, and this became a key focus for the Labour government in 2003 when they set out their plans to

increase participation in higher education through the White Paper '*Future of Higher Education*' (DfES, 2003). In this, they claimed a commitment to widening participation to increase access and close the gap between the numbers of people entering higher education from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Following a change to a Conservative-led coalition government in 2010 came new ideas and higher education policies; however, the government continued to support the idea that universities were crucial for social mobility as laid out in their higher education report '*Students at the Heart of the System*' (DBIS, 2011). The independent *Browne Review* (2010) results, which considered the future of funding to support equal opportunities in higher education, also maintained similar principles and remained relevant to policy and practice.

The proposals of the White Paper in 2016 under a Conservative government - '*Success as a Knowledge Economy*' - focused on a series of reforms to the higher education system and maintained increasing social mobility for less privileged groups as a critical principle (DBIS, 2016). These reforms included the introduction of the Office for Students - a new body with fair access as part of its remit, enhanced data collection on applications, offers, and drop-out rates to enable more effective widening participation policies, and to include an institution's commitment to widening participation as part of their application for the Teaching Excellence Framework. However, the widening participation policies only had increasing access to undergraduate courses in its sights; postgraduate education was not on the agenda. The empirical part of my research draws on data collected between November 2017 and April 2019 and focuses on postgraduate students. As such, this is the political landscape within which this research should be understood, bearing in mind that the participants will have commenced undergraduate study in 2014 or before.

Most recently, the '*Levelling Up the United Kingdom*' White Paper, under Conservative leadership, focused on expanding opportunities across the UK more equally (DLUHC, 2022). Whilst the action plan for improving access to higher education is minimal, it argues for universities' important role in creating more equality across communities. The paper commits to ensuring that all "talented children from disadvantaged backgrounds" have access to a post-16 educational institution with a good record of supporting progression into higher education (DLUHC, 2022, p. 190). Further, it included proposals that the government would support the Office for Students in new plans to help institutions shift the focus from getting disadvantaged students into university and, instead, towards supporting them through university with successful outcomes (DfE, 2021). This seems like a positive shift, but the outcome of these proposals remains to be seen, especially following the COVID-19

pandemic and the ensuing cost-of-living crisis. Whilst arguably positive steps, it is too early to assess the outcome of these new policy emphases.

Since the turn of the 21st century, these governmental policies to expand higher education have aimed to aid social justice by improving career opportunities for those from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. Not only that, but participation in higher education has been constructed as a way to improve social mobility or 'fairness' for those least advantaged (Reay, 2013). The impact of these policies on access and participation will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three. However, the purported focus on social mobility underpinning governmental policies has been argued to be less about social justice and more about improving economic growth (Dillon, 2007; Gale & Parker, 2014), again, as I discuss further in Chapter Three. The term 'widening participation' has continued to be used by the government and its agencies. Yet, a national definition for its practical application remains uncertain. Institutions have been left to apply their understanding of this term, resulting in processes for increasing the number of applications from underrepresented groups. In designing their widening participation agendas, the government have focused on increasing access rather than addressing the participation and engagement experienced by the student within the educational environment and beyond.

These policy debates have meant that, in the UK, there have been substantial changes to student funding and tuition fee arrangements over the last 25 years. These changes have altered the landscape of higher education. Undergraduate students did not pay tuition fees and were entitled to means-tested maintenance grants until this changed to a means-tested maximum cost of £1000 per year in 1998 (Hubble & Bolton, 2018). With the expansion of higher education in 2006 under the new Labour government there was a rise in tuition fees to a maximum of £3000 per year with the availability of student loans and grants to cover fees and living costs upfront. In 2012, the tuition fees were raised again to a maximum of £9000 per year (rising with inflation), and many non-repayable maintenance grants were replaced with additional loans. However, with these various increases came proposals that funding agencies should cover upfront costs and that affordable repayments should be delayed until students start employment and earn over a certain amount (Browne, 2010). Most recently, in 2023, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the current cost of living crisis, a press release from the Department for Education confirmed plans to freeze the tuition fee cap at £9,250 for a further two years; however, that maintenance loans would only rise by 2.8% for the 2023/24 academic year (which is significantly less than the rate of inflation) (DfE, 2023a).

Enrolment in postgraduate degrees has steadily risen over recent years; however, there are considerably fewer first-generation students than their counterparts enrolled (this will be explored further in Chapter Three). Postgraduate taught tuition fees have seen an unequal rise across the sector over the past 14 years. A report conducted for the Sutton Trust concluded that universities in the “Golden Triangle” (Oxford, Cambridge, and some London universities) had increased their fees during this time by 101%, reaching £10,898 per year in some cases, which is 2.5 times higher than several post-1992 institutions in the sector (Wakeling & Mateos-González, 2021). In 2015, three-quarters of full-time UK-domiciled taught postgraduates had no financial support; Postgraduate research students were less likely to be self-funding than postgraduate taught students; with just over a third falling into this category, however competition for funding for this was intense (BIS, 2015).

Loans for postgraduate study have relatively recently been introduced, with master’s loans arriving in 2016 up to a maximum of £10,000 and doctoral loans coming in 2018 up to a maximum of £25,000, rising with inflation (HM-Treasury, 2016). However, the loan for a postgraduate taught programme at one of the Golden Triangle institutions would not even cover the tuition fee, never mind any living costs. As with undergraduate funding, the recent press release confirmed that maintenance loans for postgraduate study would also increase by 2.8% for the academic year 2023/24 (DfE, 2023a). With these changes in fees and funding, monitoring how this might impact those from the most financially disadvantaged backgrounds remains crucial. Given the timing of the master’s and doctoral loans coming into play, most of the participants in my research did not have loans of this sort but instead had secured university funding in the form of a fee waiver.

Neoliberal policies have increasingly shaped the higher education context, emphasising competitiveness, individualism, and privatisation. This shift has had profound implications for individuals, institutions, and the academy, as market-driven principles have transformed the university environment (Mitchell, 2019; Mula et al., 2022). Understanding this context is important for students who have increasingly become seen as consumers (Vican et al., 2020) and particularly important for postgraduate research students where there has been a tightening of completion times and a greater need to develop professional skills beyond the qualification to secure future employment (Caretta et al., 2018; Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). Similar implications continue into early careers in academia, careers which many doctoral students may aspire to. Early career researchers often face an intensification of work and continued pressures to enhance and diversify their skill sets (Mula et al., 2022). While this landscape is challenging for all doctoral students, first-generation students may be impacted disproportionately. To be absolutely clear, this thesis does not focus on ‘the postgraduate

study experience' (e.g. in the sense of researching my participant's experience of changing funding models); however, it is important to acknowledge these influences given that my sample of research master's and doctoral students were studying in this context and may aspire to these sorts of careers in the academy.

Furthermore, these neoliberal influences likely impact institutions differently and place financial pressures on post-1992 universities. Typically, post-1992 universities have fewer financial resources than their older, more established counterparts, such as those in the Russell Group. As a result, they may be less equipped to secure competitive funding and provide the necessary support, scholarships, and opportunities for research students. One important aspect to consider is the context of the fieldwork university and how its culture, mission, status, and student population may differ from some other institutions. The fieldwork occurred at a mid-ranking (according to *The Complete University Guide*, 2024) post-1992 university in the North of England (in a mill town known for its textile industry during the Victorian era Industrial Revolution), and is typical of these new universities in many ways. These universities tend to recruit more locally, attract students from non-traditional backgrounds (i.e., first-generation students and others targeted by the widening participation agenda), have a higher proportion of commuter students (i.e., those who have not "engaged in traditional forms of residential relocation to attend university" (Finn, 2017a, p. 8)), and rank lower in the university league tables than pre-1992 institutions. Therefore, this context is important for understanding the findings presented in this thesis. For instance, my participants predominantly did not experience the strong 'culture shock' reported by some non-traditional students at more elite universities (Jack, 2014) partly because many undergraduates seemed to come from similar non-traditional backgrounds. Thus, the positive stories of success told by my sample of thirty first-generation students may have been different had they attended a more traditional university with a less inclusive educational environment.

The fieldwork university has a student population of roughly 20,000, with around 25% of these being students from overseas. The institution proudly highlights its numerous accolades, and recently, it was awarded a gold rating in the Teaching Excellence Framework for the student experience and outcomes categories. Furthermore, the *Times Higher Education* presented the University Impact Ratings for 2024, in which the fieldwork university ranked highly for one of the categories: '*Reduced Inequalities*' (THE, 2024). This category focuses on promoting an inclusive environment, particularly for first-generation students, those with disabilities, and students from developing countries. However, like many universities across the sector, this institution has been financially impacted by stalled student enrolment since the COVID-19 pandemic and the freeze of the tuition fee cap over recent

years. Combined with the cost-of-living crisis and declining enrolment of international students (due to new immigration policies), the sector's financial stability is under strain.

As highlighted earlier in this chapter, widening participation was a very important, new, and largely cross-party policy goal over at least the last 20 years. However, very recently, government policy seems to be shifting away from widening participation with, for instance, the current Conservative government announcing plans to reduce the number of university courses (and places) in favour of investment in skilled apprenticeships (DfE, 2023b). At the time of submitting my thesis, this university and other similar institutions are making drastic changes to their structure and vision for the future, resulting in staff cuts and the closure, or reduction, of those courses that are not deemed financially viable. Indeed, many of my participants were aligned with these disciplines. Given the current uncertainty in future government and government policy, it is at least feasible that the government (as well as individual institutions) in the UK may draw back from its previous widening participation agendas. This context is important for understanding the implications of the findings presented in my thesis, as this ongoing financial strain and course closures may threaten initiatives designed to foster equity and inclusion and undermine the progress made in reducing educational inequalities.

1.2. Contextualising This Research

The underrepresented target audience for the UK's higher education widening participation policy is both simple and complex. Simple in that it captures all those who have not traditionally been a part of the higher education system into a single group. Complex in that underneath that term are several different groups and individuals who represent a variety of histories, contexts, and experiences (e.g., classed, raced, or gendered identities). Including a diversity of groups under one umbrella term means that it is unlikely any policy could successfully understand each group's experience. Within each group, multiple individual identities experience that category in different ways. Inequality is not simply a point where marginalised identities interact but a space where "dynamics of identity, power, and history play out to shape educational experiences and outcomes in differential ways" (Núñez, 2014, p. 87). Inequalities often intersect at the level of the individual subject. What is captured by the term intersectionality is "the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities" (Collins, 2015, p. 2). In short, any single marginalised identity is best captured in its relationship to other marginalised statuses. Whilst the scope of this thesis does not cover such concepts in depth, it is imperative to acknowledge the complexities that engender inequality.

One such group that falls under the widening participation agenda pertains to the parental educational level. Whether or not parents have attended and achieved higher education continues to be a predictor of their children's likelihood to enrol at university. Exploring this particularly influential factor on participation in education is the focus of this research. Those who are the first in their family to enter higher education are often referred to as 'first-generation' or 'first in family' students. Whilst there are variations in the definition of these terms, I will use the term 'first-generation' to describe those whose parents *and siblings* have not commenced or completed a university degree (O'Shea et al., 2016). However, it is noted here (and explored further in Chapter Three) that other definitions, such as those that do not refer to siblings, have been used in the associated literature. Discussions of social class are connected to first-generation status, i.e., because the university was previously an elite and predominantly middle-class experience, working-class people have been traditionally less likely to be students (Loveday, 2015). Inevitably, then, people who are 'first in family' students are more likely to come from working-class than middle-class backgrounds. As alluded to in the prologue to this thesis, I carefully considered whether the issues faced by first-generation students were inherently and solely tied to social class background and concluded that rather than presume this to be the case in advance, I would seek to recruit a sample defined by their 'first-generation' (rather than class) status and, through fieldwork and analysis, explore the potential influence of social class and other factors on their experiences.

In considering a theoretical perspective for my research, Pierre Bourdieu and his capital and social reproduction concepts seemed particularly relevant (Bourdieu, 1986, 1990b). Through this lens, I understood that unequal access to educational opportunities was partly a result of an unequal distribution of resources and that this was reproduced through the family environment (Chapter Two explores this in greater depth). But I questioned what this meant for first-generation students who were juxtaposed to the status quo – those apparently who did not have capital but succeeded in education anyway. Much of the literature is overshadowed by this discourse that some groups do not have access to the valued economic, social, and cultural resources that enable participation in higher education. Bourdieu's understanding of capital was closely bound up with the reproduction of social class divisions, yet with so many first-generation students participating and succeeding in higher education, I considered that capital should be explored through a broader lens. Namely, that capital is subjective, and its value depends on how it is experienced in context. Therefore, the following thesis will focus on notions of capital rather than class, though I do not intend to undermine the significance of society's deeply entrenched social class divisions.

Despite efforts to widen access to undergraduate programmes, the journey does not end at the Bachelor's level. Besides introducing postgraduate loans, government discourses and policies have paid little attention to equity issues for those enrolling on postgraduate research degrees. Understanding the barriers and facilitators to postgraduate success is crucial for ensuring that students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds can fully benefit from higher education opportunities. Whilst this is an under-researched area, scholars have begun to explore some of the issues pertaining to access and experience of postgraduate study (such as Mitchell, 2019; Wakeling & Mateos-González, 2021). However, conversations in this field lack an understanding of engagement and participation across the educational lifespan of those considered 'under-represented' in higher education. One of the contributions of this thesis is that it takes a more holistic approach to addressing not only matters of access but also sustained participation and success in the educational field. One of the implications of this is that we can gain a nuanced insight into how students can be supported to be successful at the highest levels of study.

Making decisions around education is complex; it is about much more than whether an individual is academically capable. Decisions are often influenced by current circumstances and future goals, but past events and experiences also hold a great weight. By exploring individual historical biographies, this research set out to understand, more holistically, how these first-generation students navigated their entire educational journeys. From their experiences in primary and secondary school to their participation in post-compulsory schooling through to their successes in higher education, this research examines the factors – from the participant's point of view - that positively influenced their continued engagement and participation. How some people with no previous history or family involvement in higher education (i.e., 'first-generation' students) achieve success in education (as far as postgraduate study) is the focus of my thesis; no presumption is made that success in these educational pathways equates to or brings wider success in life.

This research focuses on the positive contributors to engagement rather than on the barriers to participation. A plethora of research studies have examined how these barriers are experienced by a diversity of student groups; indeed, this research has provided a crucial foundation for my own project. However, such approaches can sometimes veer towards deficit discourses about families with little higher education experience and can struggle to explain how some first-generation students are successful in education despite these obstacles. My research tries to resist such deficit discourses by focusing on the positive factors that encourage and promote progression. In this thesis, I will use the word 'positive' when discussing the factors that enable participation and achievement in education. I do not use this word uncritically, however, and I recognise that engagement in higher education is

not unalloyed positivity (not least due to the enormous costs of participation and the declining financial payoffs resulting from graduate underemployment). I am using this term as shorthand for attributes that are essentially pro-engagement and pro-education.

1.3. Thesis Roadmap

Chapter Two will outline the conceptual lens through which this thesis should be understood. I will pay particular attention to the concept of 'capital' and consider how Pierre Bourdieu and others have used this concept to explain disparities in educational success. I will consider its usefulness for exploring first-generation student success in education and argue that the value placed on different capital resources should be understood as contextual rather than absolute. Finally, I will synthesise this theorisation of capital with the notion of 'critical moments' to suggest that pivotal events may prompt individuals to draw on their capital resources more effectively and strategically.

Chapter Three will review the literature on first-generation status. First, I will outline issues of access and participation and define the landscape within which first-generation students are positioned. I will then consider the literature pertinent to first-generation experiences, focusing on the factors influencing engagement and participation in the educational field and how these factors complement or interrupt potential educational success. This chapter will explore first-generation students' educational journeys, from their pre-university decisions to postgraduate study and beyond.

Chapter Four will outline the methodological considerations. I will explore how my philosophical position as a critical realist and Bourdieusian perspective led to the qualitative, long-term, biographical research design. I will consider my position as a researcher, first-generation student, and staff member in relation to my participants and outline the ethical considerations. I will discuss the process of conducting biographical interviews with thirty first-generation students, and finally, I will outline how thematic analysis and narrative constructions were conducted to make sense of the data.

Chapter Five will outline the significance of family support as a mechanism for enabling participation in education. The findings presented in this chapter will argue that parents are pivotal to their first-generation children's engagement and participation in education. I will suggest that the support enacted through the family environment is crucial for mobilising capital and positioning success in education as a way to increase future opportunities.

Chapter Six will outline how other relationships beyond the family became a mechanism for enabling meaningful participation. The findings presented in this chapter will argue that through relationships with peers, teachers, and partners, first-generation students can build

the tangible and intangible resources needed to propel them to undergraduate and, subsequently, postgraduate study. Further, I will suggest that these students were connected to the real possibility of attending university through critical moments that arose within these relationships.

Chapter Seven will outline the mechanisms that enabled their continued participation and success in the postgraduate environment. The findings presented in this chapter will argue that new conflicts arose at the postgraduate level between their own and other's experiences and expectations. However, I will suggest that it was important for these first-generation students to accept their changing worlds and acknowledge that their educational pursuits are a priority because of the perceived benefits for themselves and their families.

The final chapter will offer a review of the thesis. I will discuss the conclusions and contributions of my research, reflect on its limitations, and offer recommendations for future research.

2. Chapter Two - The Conceptual Lens

In this chapter, I will outline the conceptual lens which underpins this thesis. By explaining the underlying theory of capital, I aim to demonstrate how this concept can serve to understand the experiences of first-generation students and their narratives of success in education. To do this, I will mainly focus on Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualisation of capital, but I will also draw on other interpretations and applications of the concept throughout. This chapter does not aim to present the literature on capital and first-generation status (this comes in the next chapter). However, instead, its purpose is to explore the different ways capital has been conceptualised. This chapter will draw on several of Bourdieu's works (such as Bourdieu, 1977, 1984; Bourdieu, 1986, 1990a, 1990b; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) in a way that brings together his ideas and highlights his key theoretical understandings.

In introducing the concepts that characterised Bourdieu's work, I will begin by exploring his background to demonstrate the context from which his interests and position on social reproduction are based. Although the concept of capital specifically will be the focus of this thesis, this formed part of a more comprehensive analysis of the reproduction of the social order. Therefore, I will briefly discuss his connected concepts of habitus and field before moving on to a thorough exploration of capital. Finally, I will offer a synthesis of Bourdieusian concepts with that of 'critical moments' to suggest that single moments or events may be crucial for first-generation students to recognise and mobilise the types of capital that lead to transformative change. I will conclude that capital takes many forms and that despite Bourdieu's tendency to downplay the relevance of capital for less privileged groups, capital can be employed by first-generation students to participate and engage in the educational environment. It will be concluded that capital is experienced through context and how, in an open system, we can hope to understand generative mechanisms when understanding its application.

2.1. Introducing Bourdieu

In an overview of his early works, Murdock (2010) outlined how Bourdieu was raised in a working-class family in a remote, rural village in France. He negotiated the schooling system and was able to attend a prestigious university in France, where he pursued his lifelong interest in the connections between culture, social class, and power relations. His interest in cultural practices and institutions led him to his early works researching the cultural dynamics of social privilege, looking at both museums and photography (Murdock, 2010). From this, he theorised how museum attendees from working-class backgrounds were overwhelmed with a sense of not feeling at home. Further, he mused the vast disparity

between those who enjoyed photography to capture a moment and those who experimented for visual style and appreciation. These ideas have been summarised as “cultural preferences are securely anchored in the systems of perception, judgement and action generated by the social conditions prevailing in families, education systems and the multiple milieux of adult life” (Murdock, 2010, p. 64).

Despite being able to negotiate his schooling, Bourdieu’s educational experience taught him that whilst some opportunities were available for working-class people, the education system seemed to favour those from a more privileged upbringing. Whilst appreciating that money and wealth were vital contributors to this, Bourdieu’s works seemed to comment on Marx’s earlier theories, proposing that it is not only economic resources that affect power distribution. His key concepts were born from his position that social connections and cultural appreciation, requiring prolonged and expert engagement, also maintained social inequality and disadvantage. As such, Bourdieu sought to understand how privileged people were advantaged in the education system through a lens of reconciling structure and agency.

The following sections will describe the fundamental concepts pertinent to this understanding. Whilst interconnected and dependent on each other, each concept is specific in its meaning and only understood fully through its nuances and relationship to the others. The relatedness of each concept should become apparent through discussion of the critical concepts of habitus, field, and capital and, ultimately, the formula that results in the theory of practice. This is a somewhat summarisation and more succinct version than Bourdieu’s writings. Nevertheless, it highlights the fundamental aspects of each concept and maintains Bourdieu’s original meanings as far as possible. In applying each concept, it would be inadmissible to consider it outside of the context of the others without compromising the original meaning of Bourdieu’s writings.

2.2. Field and Habitus

While my thesis will mainly focus on the theory of capital, it is essential to understand capital in relation to both habitus and field, as they do not work independently but instead in conjunction to inform practices. Bourdieu explores the interconnectedness of these concepts by producing a formula known as the theory of practice, which shows that “(Habitus X Capital) + Field = Practice” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101). Although this seems a rather simplistic expression of a complex process, it provides a concise account of the interaction between the concepts. It explores how habitus and capital interact within a dynamic context, which

then engenders practice (Burke, 2016). In the context of this research, we may understand practice as social practice in the form of educational outcomes.

Bourdieu understood the social reproduction and advantage in education through how individuals experience this structure or social space, whereby struggles over resources and access to them occur. This space encompasses not only the broader societal context but also the specific educational institution, and it is these structures that Bourdieu refers to as a 'field'. Bourdieu understands a field as a structured system that determines agents' experience and where power struggles exist; he defines a field as:

A network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situations ... in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) where possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, cited in; Jenkins, 1992, p. 53).

As such, the educational field is a competitive space whereby the attainment and outcomes of agents are ranked against their peers. It is a structure and a social space of different positions within which an individual is socialised into an evolving set of roles and relationships within the schooling system. Further, the competition and everyday struggle that exists through social inequality impact the attainment and outcomes of the individuals in the field. The 'field' is a relational concept of the people and practices within it having access to different resources (capitals) and occupying different spaces. It is a system of forces and power relations between those in that social space whereby individuals hold different positions based on the resources at stake within that field. The educational field then not only hosts struggle for intellect but struggles of advantage and disadvantage dependent on social position.

Understanding wider society as a field creates a sense of legitimacy of the resources at play for its agents and the competition for available resources. Those in more privileged positions find opportunities and knowledge plentiful, holding an advantage reproduced through their children. As such, disadvantage prevails through societal structures, preventing some from securing the same opportunities. Bourdieu describes the educational field as working in much the same way as the structure of schools, being traditionally middle-class fields, holding middle-class values, and middle-class teacher professions. Because of this, middle-class children "move in their world as a fish in water" (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 108) in a familiar environment, yet others do not participate with the same ease.

The ease with which a child can flourish and be successful within the educational field then depends on how comfortable they feel within that field. The ability of a middle-class child to enter this field with familiarity with the linguistic, authority and learning structures is a much more comfortable transition than for those who are unfamiliar. Children are expected to flourish in an environment familiar to them, so being from a background that holds similar values to that of the middle-class field of the school means they are at an advantage. The ability for an individual to be successful then depends not only on the broader structure of the field but also on their status, predispositions, experiences, and values and whether these are congruent to those of the field. Bourdieu describes this as an individual's habitus.

Bourdieu describes what he terms personality and inclinations towards a particular subjective experience as habitus. Habitus refers to how expectations and values are internalised and how their experiences influence this. In turn, these individual practices form part of the actions and practices of a larger social group. Bourdieu describes habitus as the "systems of durable, transposable dispositions; structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 53). The habitus begins through early socialisation in the family unit and is constructed through the context of all prior experiences; it is constantly redefined through its formation yet maintains some consistency throughout. The habitus acts as an unconscious note to action and is seen as an underlying predisposition independent of calculated and rational measurement.

Habitus is formed on both an individual and a group level; however, Bourdieu notes that individual habitus "is never more than a deviation" (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 60) away from that of the group habitus. It confers a sense of power relations by predisposing individuals to identify themselves as holding a particular position relative to others in the social field. This is pertinent for the reproduction of social inequality through how individuals internalise what is possible, or probable, for their social class, that is, essential life experiences and chances of succeeding or failing. These are then transformed into their expectations of the world and their aspirations. Opportunities that seem unlikely are, therefore, unthinkable, and there is a tendency to refuse what they are refused. Those whose habitus does not align with the middle-class domain of the educational field are likely to reject university as a possible option, for example, refuting its validity for their trajectory. The internalisation of what others with a similar socioeconomic standing have been able to achieve tends to reproduce the subconscious boundaries of practices and experiences available to them.

A common criticism of Bourdieu, particularly his concept of habitus, is that of structural determinism. While Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) suggest that a dramatic shift in one's environment could change or break the habitus, they argue that this is unlikely because of

the nature of the habitus itself. Bourdieu does little to explain how this cycle can be broken. However, he acknowledges that the habitus is a *tendency* rather than a predetermined route whereby there is no agency for the individuals concerned. What it does highlight is the way that habitus and field in disjunction tend to cause disadvantage and ill-ease. Bourdieu attempts to reconcile notions of structure and agency through the concepts of field and habitus. The field imposes a structure on the individual, which is internalised over time and becomes the habitus, while the individual's actions externalise their interactions with other agents in the social field. Bourdieu further determines that resources influence the social order, and these can be exchanged for goods or positions in society. The crux of his argument is that individuals negotiate their environment in relation to the force of the field, their dispositions, and their resources, making some trajectories more or less likely. He refers to these resources as 'capital', which will be the focus of the following section.

2.3. Capital

This section will focus on capital and its three primary forms: economic, social, and cultural (Bourdieu, 1986). Effectively, the forms of capital are the resources one has access to, which can shape an individual's position within social space. Bourdieu (1984) refers to the importance of capital as "the field of the possibles" whereby within "a given volume of inherited capital, there corresponds a band of more or less equally probable trajectories leading to more or less equivalent positions" (p. 104). Therefore, his discussion of capital seems to consider that the inherited capital from the family leads to tendencies for unequal access to specific trajectories rather than predisposing individuals one way or the other; "all positions of arrival are not equally probable for all starting points"(Bourdieu, 1984, p. 104). Capital is a multi-faceted concept with a relational and contextual character (Burke, 2016) which suggests that some forms of capital may allow individuals to alter their position in social space and change the trajectory that their habitus may have disposed them towards.

2.3.1. Economic Capital

Economic capital is the most straightforward and self-explanatory form of capital. It refers to an individual's money and wealth, which can be exchanged for other societal resources. This typically encompasses income, property, investments, and inheritances, which enable the possession of physical material goods and forms of cultural practice symbolic of economic wealth. Economic capital is immediately convertible into money and is easily transferred to another individual in the field at any one time (Bourdieu, 1986). This kind of capital can be passed down to offspring, instantaneously reproducing any social status obtained from

possessing this resource. In this sense, it is easy to see how intergenerational privilege and inequality can persist.

Bourdieu argues that earlier theorists (such as Marx) who focused on the power and privilege that encapsulate economic capital may miss crucial nuances of capital which are powerful in maintaining (dis)advantage (Bourdieu, 1986). Those with greater wealth are afforded access to practices with higher value, such as private education, high culture, and forms of knowledge. The value of these depends on who is doing the valuing. So, in a society where the privileged ascertain what is valued, these may continue to be perceived as more valued aspirations. The socio-economic circumstances of an individual or group can constrain the expectations and aspirations of that individual or group, inadvertently excluding practices deemed to not align with their levels of economic capital (Bowers-Brown, 2016). Having greater economic wealth means one can afford private education, private tutoring, resources to support their child's education, and more time free from economic struggle. However, it fails to engender the appropriation of culture, experience, and relationships, which may contribute to educational outcomes. Arguably, economic capital underpins this by enabling access to specific ways of being, material possessions, and a certain level of education, which Bourdieu argues can all be converted into economic capital and vice versa (Bourdieu, 1986):

The convertibility of the different types of capital is the basis of the strategies aimed at ensuring the reproduction of capital (and the position occupied in social space) using the conversions least costly in terms of the conversion work and of the losses inherent in the conversion itself (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243).

In other words, Bourdieu argues that capital can be utilised to accumulate more capital and help maintain one's position in the social field. Economic capital can be converted into social or cultural capital and vice versa.

2.3.2. Social Capital

Whilst the importance of relationships has been in sociological thought since the likes of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, the term 'social capital' has been associated with Pierre Bourdieu and, later, by James Coleman and Robert Putnam. In general, social capital focuses on the idea that networks and relationships are a resource individuals can use to help achieve their goals. Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1990), and Putnam (2000) all offer a distinct view of social capital; however, Field (2008) argues that despite their differences, "social capital consists of personal connections and interpersonal interactions, together with the shared set of values that are associated with these contacts" (pp. 15-16). As such, in this

section, I will discuss the notion of social capital and how it can help understand the experience of first-generation students.

Bourdieu understood social capital as part of his more comprehensive analysis of the unequal nature of society. He argued that a social network results from collective or individual, conscious or unconscious attempts to establish and reproduce social networks that can be drawn upon. Bourdieu offered definitions in his early writings but later refined them to argue that “Social capital is the sum of resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). In this sense, we can understand social capital as the tangible and intangible resources which can be gained through interpersonal relationships or broader social networks.

Bourdieu’s main discussion focuses on how those from more privileged backgrounds invest in their social networks to maintain societal power. Each actor within that network has the backing of the collective social capital, which may exist through the material or symbolic exchange that helps maintain the relationship. This investment may also be enacted using a common name, for example, a family surname or a school and by a set of socially defined behaviours that form and inform those who are a part of the group. The size of the network and the amount of economic and cultural capital an individual has access to then inform the level of social capital each actor within the network can attain. Furthermore, the economic and cultural capital they have access to affects the family's socioeconomic status. This presupposes the types of networks and groups one can access. When parents have professional occupations, the family are more likely to be well-connected in that field and can transfer access to those groups to their children. In such instances, it could be assumed that the family unit has access to more valued economic and cultural capital and holds a more privileged position in the social field. For those with less valued economic and cultural capital and, therefore, from a less privileged socioeconomic position, access to professional and elite networks is much more unattainable through the family unit.

Maintaining and reproducing social capital requires time and energy and is only profitable when an individual can invest in a particular aspect, such as family relationships or knowledge. Further, crucial to this form of capital is the acquisition of the disposition to maintain it successfully (Bourdieu, 1986). Individuals or groups that hold a significant volume of economic and cultural capital may inherit an elevated level of social capital through a great family name, for example. This allows an individual to easily transform circumstantial acquaintances into lasting relationships because their worth is symbolised through their

family name. In such cases, we see how the profitability of such relations rises proportionately with the size of the other capitals.

Bourdieu stresses the importance of durable networks by showing how relationships that may depend on physical proximity, such as a neighbourhood, can be transformed into friendship and more meaningful relations. Such transformations happen through ongoing exchanges of words, gifts, or respect, which reproduce and produce mutual recognition and knowledge. Bourdieu (1986) describes how “exchanges transforms the things exchanged into signs of recognition and, through the mutual recognition and the recognition of group membership which it implies, reproduces the group” (p. 248). As such, the network of social relations is not constructed through a single act but through prolonged exchanges with other people. However, geographically proximal networks can often be segmented by socioeconomic background, given how neighbourhoods are often bound by aspects of (dis)advantage.

Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of social capital shines a bright light on its connection with power, offering it as an asset belonging to individuals or families of privileged groups. However, Bourdieu underplays social capital’s importance for less privileged groups and the “buying potential” for individuals to increase their life chances (Burke, 2016, p. 14). Like Bourdieu, Coleman’s conceptualisation of social capital came from his interest in understanding the relationship between academic achievement and social inequality (Field, 2008). Unlike Bourdieu, though, he provided a deeper insight into how social capital could benefit less privileged groups by examining the academic achievement of ethnic minority groups in America. Coleman (1990) conceptualised social capital as a resource within a rational choice theory framework. Within this framework, Coleman understood behaviour as resulting from an individual’s pursuit of self-interest, thereby seeing social capital as a resource involving the expectation of exchange and reciprocity.

Coleman’s conceptualisation of social capital was a *post-hoc* development following several empirical studies exploring academic achievement in private and public schools. Hoffer et al. (1985) found that Catholic school pupils had better performance and lower dropout rates than those from state schools with comparable abilities and backgrounds; the findings were particularly stark for those from the least privileged backgrounds. Coleman theorised that the impact of community norms and values endorsed teachers’ expectations and that this was the primary explanation for the pattern, concluding that this source of social capital through the community could compensate for some of the disadvantages experienced in families in terms of social and economic factors (Hoffer et al., 1985). Coleman (1990) later went on to define social capital as:

“The set of resources that inhere in family relations and community social organisations and that are useful for the cognitive or social development of a child or young person. These resources differ for different persons and can constitute an important advantage for children and adolescents in the development of their human capital” (p. 300)

In understanding how relationships can function as a resource, Coleman (1988) argues that obligations and expectations are developed among actors, that channels are opened for information exchange, norms are set which endorse certain behaviours over others, and a level of trust is built in the social environment. Putnam also echoed trustworthiness as a critical component of social capital, and whilst Bourdieu was not so explicit, he implicitly refers to this by discussing how people who club together to expand their connections must do so on some basis of trust (Field, 2008). Others have furthered this by arguing that social capital reflects “the information, trust, and norms of reciprocity inhering in one’s social network” (Woolcock, 1998, p. 153) and that trust is a source of social capital in itself (Fukuyama, 1996).

Putnam further popularised the concept of social capital following his seminal book ‘*Bowling Alone*’ (2000), discussing the long-term demise of civic engagement in America. In his earlier works, he explored the differences in public policy performance between the north and south of Italy. He concluded that the pattern was related to the mutual relationship between civil society and government. Putnam used the notion of social capital to explain his findings further, suggesting that social capital can function to benefit society: “Social capital here refers to features of social organisation, such as trust, norms and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (Putnam et al., 1993, p. 167). In later refinements of the definition, Putnam offered more focus on the individual as a potential beneficiary of social capital by arguing that “by ‘social capital’ I mean features of social life – networks, norms and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (Putnam, 1996, as cited in Field, 2008, p. 35). He later argues that “the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value ... social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups” (Putnam, 2000, pp. 18-19). Like Coleman, Putnam offered ‘norms’ and ‘trust’ as critical components of social capital, arguing for a strong positive correlation between well-being and social capital and downplaying the role of power inequalities in their arguments.

Putnam (2000) offered a helpful distinction between types of social capital; “bridging” and “bonding” (pp. 22-24). The term bonding (or exclusive) social capital refers to relationships with close family and friends in similar situations; it looks inwards and functions to maintain strong in-group identities. By contrast, bridging (or inclusive) social capital refers to wider

relationships with acquaintances and those outside their inner circle; it offers external links and functions to generate broader identities. Putnam (2000) summarises the difference as *getting by* compared to *getting ahead*. Woolcock (2001, p. 13) offers a further type of “linking” social capital, which refers to relationships with others up and down the socioeconomic scale. Linking social capital offers opportunities to access information and resources from those outside of their socioeconomic position.

The notion of emotional capital has been linked to the concept of social capital and is constitutive of close family and friend relationships. According to Nowothy (1981), emotional capital can be defined as “knowledge, contacts and relations, as well as access to emotionally valued skills and assets, which hold within any social network, characterised at least partly by affective ties” (p. 148). Further, Allatt (1993, p. 143) offers a definition that incorporates “love and affection, expenditure of time, attention, care, and concern”, also identifying commitment, support, and patience as examples of the stock of emotional resources. Much of the conceptualisation of emotional capital and its impact on education outcomes has focused on the transmission from mother to child (Zembylas, 2007). This tends to argue for the gendered nature of the concept. However, Nowothy (1981) and Allatt (1993) do not confine the concept to women, but women appear to have more significant amounts of this in the relationship between family and education.

This concept has been used to focus specifically on the emotional relationship between mothers and their children during schooling. Reay (2000) argues that emotional capital denotes the “emotional resources passed on from mother to child” (p. 284) and views it as an investment in others rather than something that can be transmitted. Thereby, the notion that one form of capital can increase another is disrupted, and Reay goes on to argue that “if emotional capital is to be viewed as inextricably linked to educational success, then it sometimes appears to be at the cost of both mothers and their children’s wellbeing” (2000, p. 580). However, Zembylas (2007) applied the concept to schools and classrooms and argued that “emotional capital – expressed through the circulation of emotional resources among teachers and students – is systematically transformed into social and cultural capital – such as stronger relations in the classroom and empowered feelings in the school community” (pp. 453-454).

This conceptualisation shifts away from the gendered aspects of emotional capital and offers an insight into how emotional capital can be utilised to support educational achievement. Emotional capital, then, perhaps, should be seen as a concept that can stretch beyond the boundaries of gender as something that involves a deep emotional investment that can have implications for education. It seems that emotional capital is not necessarily separate from

social capital but that the term could be used to explore the nuances and mechanisms of social capital more generally. It helps offer explanatory power to the impact of relationships on a cultural, social, and economic level and successful educational outcomes. In a Bourdieusian sense, social capital seems to be positioned as something which benefits the privileged and contributes to the reproduction of inequalities. However, other conceptualisations of the term highlight the possibilities for interrogating social capital more closely to examine its usefulness for those from less privileged backgrounds.

2.3.3. Cultural Capital

Cultural capital was a term coined by Bourdieu to lessen the burden placed on economic capital and highlight that access to cultural knowledge was even more important in the foundations of social inequality and educational attainment. Cultural capital is the forms of knowledge, skills, and speech a person possesses within the social field. Bourdieu used the term to understand the unequal distribution of attainment across different social positions, and he posed that:

The notion of cultural capital initially presented itself to me, in the course of the research, as a theoretical hypothesis which made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from different social classes by relating academic success, i.e., the specific profits which children from the different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243).

To understand cultural capital, we must explore how Bourdieu (1986) describes cultural capital as existing on three levels: embodied, objectified and institutionalised. Whilst each is intrinsically fundamental to the functioning of the other, they highlight the complexity of the properties of cultural capital and the way individuals and social groups are positioned in the social and educational field. Firstly, I will consider the level of the embodied. Embodied cultural capital takes a long time to embed, and it must be invested in personally by the individual “like the acquisition of a muscular physique or a suntan, it cannot be done second hand” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 244). Embodied cultural capital is not transmissible and cannot be instantaneously gifted to another or exchanged explicitly for goods. It is acquired not through deliberate or conscious thought but through an individual’s place in society, their social class positioning, and through the appropriating capacity of the individual. As such, Bourdieu’s conceptualisation suggests that an individual’s habitus and position within the social field ultimately impact the acquisition of cultural capital in this state.

Embodied cultural capital is predisposed to act more symbolically than economic capital in the way it acts as a cultural recognition rather than as something that has an immediate

value. In the educational field, families have varying resources to draw on to support their children through the schooling system. Those in less privileged positions may be less equipped to support their child financially and with the necessary time, energy, and cultural knowledge required for further education. This results in disadvantages and means their children may face difficulties in the labour market and achieving upward mobility (Lareau, 2015). It can reap profits of distinction for an individual when large amounts of any given cultural capital are owned, especially where a scarcity value may be derived, for example, learning to read in a group of those who cannot. Social divisions are produced when some individuals can acquire a large amount of cultural capital. Embodied cultural capital, in this respect, differs from economic capital through the length of time it takes for transmission. The level of embodied cultural capital of the family often determines the level and time taken for a child to appropriate a certain level of cultural capital. Differences in the strength of cultural capital within a family imply different ages when the accumulation process can begin and at different capacities. This accumulation starts from a young age and continues throughout a child's whole socialisation process, but only for those with more significant amounts of cultural and economic capital. This is not the same for everyone, as Bourdieu states:

The length of time for which a given individual can prolong his acquisition process depends on the length of time his family can provide him free time, i.e. time free from economic necessity, which is the precondition for the initial accumulation (1986, p. 245).

Therefore, in a household with much time and energy occupied with everyday financial struggles, there is potentially less time to support a child's educational trajectory. Furthermore, where it is not necessary for a child to enter employment straight from compulsory schooling to contribute to the family income, an individual has the "time" to continue accumulating their cultural capital at university, for example.

Secondly, cultural capital in the objectified state refers to the materiality of cultural goods defined through their relationship with embodied cultural capital. Such material objects are transmissible in much the same way as economic capital, but this relates to the legal ownership of it and not necessarily the means of appropriation of it. Books, for example, are easily transferred to offspring physically; however, the ability for a child to consume these in a culturally appropriate way relies on cultural capital in the embodied state. Objects, in this sense, act in a way that symbolically identifies the cultural capital a person has access to and in their possession. It allows materials to be consumed in a way that demands prior cultural knowledge (Bourdieu, 1986). Individuals or groups must have access to the necessary embodied cultural capital directly or by proxy to use these objects for their given

purpose. Those who possess cultural capital in the objectified state can only participate in its practice when the cultural capital is embodied. Objectified cultural capital intrinsically relies upon embodied cultural capital in that cultural material objects only have value when the individual knows how to consume them.

In their objectified state, learning tools for socialising a child to be comfortable in the education system will only prove useful when they are appropriately consumed. In the household, owning books, technology, and other educational resources is not enough, and the child must learn how to engage with these objects through critical engagement and prolonged exposure. Furthermore, the way schools give homework to children means that children must learn the importance of completing this through how their parents engage with it and support their learning. By actively engaging with these objects and activities regarding discussion and practice in the household, for example, a child who is socialised in that environment is more likely to learn and understand its cultural value. Investing time and effort in reading or learning new things further embodies the cultural value of the objects in the household, and it is more pertinent for a child who has seen their parents engage in this way. In this respect, the material objects are transmissible to the child. However, they are only valuable when the child embodies the necessary knowledge and skills to consume the cultural objects through a prolonged socialisation period.

Finally, cultural capital in the institutionalised state refers to how cultural capital is objectified through qualifications, academic credentials, and legitimation (Bourdieu, 1986). This form of cultural capital distinguishes between the self-learned person whose credibility could be questioned and the person whose learning has been sanctioned by legal qualification. Cultural capital in this form is not transmissible and extends only as far as the biological life of the individual in the embodied sense. With the academic qualification comes “a certificate of cultural competence” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 246) which allows social recognition and cultural value to be placed upon them. Bourdieu describes how once this is obtained, it becomes autonomous to both the individual and the cultural capital one possesses at any moment. Cultural capital in its institutionalised state then constitutes the recognition of cultural capital formally and conventionally.

Instituting recognition of cultural capital in this respect allows for comparisons of individuals to be made in the educational field and to exchange one qualification for another higher one. Furthermore, an exchange value is placed on qualification in the labour market, allowing for a conversion rate between economic and cultural capital. This allows one individual with a qualification to be compared against another, and their cultural capital and monetary value can be assessed. This monetary value tends to fluctuate depending on the scarcity of the

qualification, so as more people qualify, the relative value decreases. This conversion of economic capital into cultural capital “is governed by changes in the structure of the chances of profit offered by the different types of capitals” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 247). Those who can institute their cultural capital in this way are then in a more legitimate position to be recognised as culturally competent.

An individual who has embodied the necessary cultural capital valued within the educational field can legitimise this through formal qualification. By navigating the schooling system and being successful within it, individuals can continue into further and higher education where they can continue their learning and obtain qualifications up to the doctoral level. At this point, the individual can legitimately be identified as culturally competent in this area and can exchange their skills and knowledge in the labour market. This highlights a cultural recognition not given to someone without said qualifications. Regardless of an individual’s ability, skill, or knowledge, without those formal qualifications, their credibility could be questioned at any time and does not allow them to exchange in the labour market similarly. Therefore, those without qualifications are often not recognised or valued similarly by those from more privileged positions.

As outlined above, Bourdieu extended the term capital from focusing on economics and machinery to cultural capital, encompassing cultural knowledge and skill. His theorising of cultural capital led him to suggest that in an unequal society whereby the means to appropriate cultural knowledge is unequally distributed, embodied culture can function as a means to acquire “exclusive advantages” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 27). Furthermore, the cultural capital that was valued was experienced through specific ways of conversing or expressing taste that was common in the “dominant” cultures. As one of Bourdieu’s founding concepts, he understands cultural capital as having a significant effect on one’s position in the social order. This theorising built on the ideas of his predecessors (such as Marx), but it shifted the focus away from economic capital as the defining feature of society. In this sense, many applications and interpretations of cultural capital support and oppose how Bourdieu situates it within social reproduction theories; some of these applications will now be discussed in more detail.

Applications and Interpretations of Cultural Capital

Since Bourdieu’s original works in the 1960s and 1970s, cultural capital has been understood and applied in a plethora of ways, some of which build on Bourdieu’s work and some of which contest and define cultural capital in alternative ways. The remainder of this section will demonstrate the differing strands of its application; however, it will not provide a

complete analysis of each distinct definition and direction in which cultural capital has been taken. A full, more in-depth review of differing definitions and how this has evolved over the decades can be found in other works (Davies & Rizk, 2017; Lareau & Weininger, 2003).

Applications of cultural capital have interpreted Bourdieu's theory in a way that positioned cultural capital as the activities and knowledge associated with high-brow culture (such as art, literature, and museums) and, thus, distinctive to those holding more privileged positions in society. Research by DiMaggio (1982) took thinking down a new strand through a more quantitative approach to understanding cultural capital. He attempted to operationalise the term through measures of participation in high-brow culture and attitudes towards it, defining cultural capital as "the mastery of elements of a prestigious status culture" (p. 191). In examining whether this could be used to predict learning outcomes and test scores in school, DiMaggio saw cultural capital as independent of measured ability and social class. It was seen as a factor anyone could possess, but teachers were likelier to pay attention to those who held the traits and style the system values. In this sense, it is supposed that exposure to high-brow culture encapsulates cultural capital and that those not privy to this exposure are deficient. This supposition is a deviation from Bourdieu's original writings whereby he describes art, literature, and museums as exemplars in the context of the French education system and not as an absolute and all-encompassing definition.

Bourdieu understood cultural capital as ultimately being bound up in differentiated social class whereby those from the 'dominant' class were privy to the benefits of cultural appropriation (Bourdieu, 1984). His experience and research within the educational field led him to directly implicate schools in the reproduction of inequality through the way schools impose a biased valuation of culture, which values those from privileged backgrounds who have been able to appropriate cultural knowledge. Through ethnographic research in schools, Lamont and Lareau (1988) shifted the lens from academic learning to how privileged parents could participate in school events and mirror valued activities in the home. This led to cultural capital as being defined through the way schools ascribed value to cultural practices for privileged parents to align to, as "institutionalised, i.e., widely shared, high-status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviours, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion" (Lamont & Lareau, 1988, p. 156). Lareau (2011) further argued that these organised activities and experiences that middle-class parents established for their children meant they engaged in a "process of concerted cultivation" (p. 1). In one sense, this supports Bourdieu's view of schools' role in valuing cultural capital. However, this perspective suggests that the agents are more active in

managing their children's experiences, and it somewhat furthers the discourse that only certain high-brow activities carry value in society.

These differing strands of applying cultural capital have continued. The strand, which DiMaggio's research has influenced, continues to use quantitative methods to attempt to operationalise the concept of cultural capital and examine its effects on educational outcomes. It has extended to look at access to higher education. Definitions of cultural capital continue to refer to the specific knowledge and competencies displayed by the upper-class (Dumais, 2002). This has produced mixed results about social reproduction and social mobility. However, there is support for the idea that access to cultural products such as books and the ability to use educated language are critical indicators of educational outcomes (Sullivan, 2001). However, further applications of the Lareau strand have continued to argue that these conceptualisations overlook the full potential of cultural capital and the full range of dimensions that Bourdieu ascribed to cultural capital in his original theories (Reay, 2004).

In understanding the full range of potential attributes for cultural capital, Lareau and Weininger (2003) focus on the micro-level interactions where an individual's knowledge and skills come into contact with institutional standards. They further highlight how it is essential to be aware of these standards but that these should be looked at critically and reflexively to understand the perspectives and actions of parents and children trying to comply with them. On a similar strain, Reay (2004) highlights the importance of more subjective experiences, such as confidence, ambivalence, and adequacy for providing support, which all form part of the framework of cultural capital. Further considerations of cultural capital have explored intergenerational and intragenerational understandings of cultural capital production and intersections with race and gender (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Harvey & Mallman, 2019; Reay, 2005; Wallace, 2022; Yosso, 2005).

Through the guise of meritocracy, it is assumed that those with the ability and motivation to succeed ultimately will, yet for Bourdieu, this merely concealed the underlying stratification of the education system and society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Unlike Bourdieu, DiMaggio and Lareau, though, Collins (1971) claimed that cultural capital is not necessarily produced through formal institutions (of family or school) and is in the subjective experience of those within a particular social grouping. He examined cultural capital on the micro level through rituals that referred to vocabulary, style, symbols, and practices valued within any setting. Collins (1971) argued that cultural capital was not bound by class differentials *per se* but by the particular social group being studied; however, this often can cross boundaries of class, race, and gender.

Bourdieu has been criticised for emphasising structures' role in limiting life chances, thus downplaying the role of agency. Yosso (2005) challenged some interpretations of Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, which places white male privilege as the standard against which all other expressions of capital are compared. To more clearly understand how individual and institutional capital intersect, Yosso (2005) offered a Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework, which understood cultural capital as forms of knowledge held by a particular group rather than something the dominant group in society determines. While the framework was applied to ethnic minorities and their experience of returning to education, O'Shea (2016) argues that this framework can be cautiously applied to other under-represented groups as an alternative lens which moves understanding beyond deficit models.

Yosso (2005) argues that communities can "nurture cultural wealth" through six different types of capital. The categories include aspirational capital, which is "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers", offering possibilities regardless of whether they have the objective means to achieve them. In contrast, resistant capital refers to the values and skills which encourage individuals "to engage in behaviours and maintain attitudes that challenge the status quo". Navigational capital refers to the "skills of manoeuvring through social institutions", and it acknowledges the role of agency in navigating the structural constraints of institutions such as schools and workplaces. Linguistic capital "includes the intellect and social skills attained through communication experiences," often through bilingualism and storytelling, whereas social capital is understood as the surrounding social networks that "can provide both instrumental and emotional support". Finally, Familial capital refers to "those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin)" and recognises both friends and the extended family (Yosso, 2005, pp. 77-81)

Bourdieu's original works aimed to critique social and cultural reproduction through a structural lens, and this CCW framework is not a direct critique of Bourdieu. However, Yosso (2005) argues that Bourdieusian approaches tend to "place value on a very narrow range of assets and characteristics" (p. 77), and this framework is a way to reconceptualise capital as a fluid and dynamic process that places value on the accumulated skills and forms of knowledge which are inherently experienced by under-represented groups rather than reflecting what is valued only by the dominant class. Although any attempts to operationalise cultural capital using this framework may not be helpful to our understanding of it, viewing cultural capital in more nuanced ways like this can help us to unpick the concept and examine data in more critical ways (O'Shea, 2016).

2.4. Critical Moments

As illustrated so far, Bourdieu's theories primarily focus on the accumulation and possession of various forms of capital, how these vary depending on habitus, and how this impacts position in the social field. Whilst this outlines the types and distribution of capital, little attention is given to the mechanisms through and occasions when individuals actively engage and utilise their capital. Critical moments theory could fill this gap by highlighting those pivotal events that prompt individuals to draw on their resources effectively and strategically. In examining life courses, young people from working-class backgrounds are likely to have different types of critical moments and respond differently to those from middle-class families (MacDonald & Shildrick, 2013; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2008; Thomson et al., 2002). However, the response to a critical moment would likely vary even where individuals share similar circumstances. This variance could possibly be attributed to the different types and extents of capital they already possess or gain access to as their trajectories unfold (MacDonald, 2011).

Critical moments can be understood as an event that has important consequences for an individual's life and identity, mapping onto a continuum between choice and fate (Thomson et al., 2002). Events can take the form of several experiences in a person's life which can result in significant changes to their future trajectory, such as those related to family, friends, sexual relationships, bereavement and illness, educational milestones, and rites of passage (MacDonald & Shildrick, 2013; Mulhall, 2016; Thomson et al., 2002). Such an approach is informed by Giddens (1991) concept of "fateful moments", describing "times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands at a crossroads in their existence or where a person learns of information with fateful consequences" (p. 113). In this respect, we can understand interactions and chance encounters with individuals and contexts that result in accessing university as critical moments for first-generation students. For these to become 'fateful moments', Giddens (1991) argues that several factors must be present: a consideration of choices, engagement in a risk assessment, engagement in identity work, employment of expert systems, the seeking of advice, conducting research, development of new skills, and exercising agency (Mulhall, 2016). Applying these concepts to higher education progression could offer helpful insight into how capital acquisition and accumulation impact the trajectory of first-generation students.

It could be that the outcome of a critical moment is connected to the types of capital an individual has access to. For those without cultural capital in the form of a degree, knowledge about university at home is considered ad-hoc, ill-informed and means reliance on friends, colleagues, or popular culture (O'Shea et al., 2016). Schools and colleges

(specifically teachers and career advisors) also play a crucial role in providing the necessary knowledge, and this is for both first-generation students as well as continuing-generation students (Hunt et al., 2018). For first-generation students, however, access to information and knowledge via their school or college is especially important, given that they may not have access to this through their home life. This highlights the importance of social capital as it enables individuals to link to wider networks and access pivotal forms of knowledge. It is argued, however, that such influences tend to be random, whereby it may be the first time they have been connected to the possibility of university. This is further supported by Gardner and Holley (2011), in their research on first-generation doctoral students who argued that “such connections were haphazard, rarely part of a planned, deliberate effort on behalf of the educational system” (p. 87).

Such *ad-hoc* circumstances of knowledge transfer and capital acquisition could be understood as a critical moment in a first-generation student's eventual progression to higher education. It would be too simplistic to argue that one moment in time, interaction, or life event could be solely responsible for a significant shift in an individual's life trajectory (MacDonald, 2011). However, it may be that events and happenings are not a single isolated moment but a complex culmination of prior experiences that come together in a moment, and it is this that enables individuals to recognise and mobilise their capital resources. Social capital may play a crucial role in this recognition as the insights and support gained through these connections could significantly influence an individual's response to a critical moment. Critical moments – such as a teacher's encouragement, a significant personal achievement, or an inspirational encounter (MacDonald & Marsh, 2005) – could act as a catalyst that enables first-generation students to disrupt patterns ascribed by their habitus and take actions that they might not otherwise have considered possible. These moments may provide an impetus for change that, subsequently, enables their successful participation in higher education.

On the surface, it may seem as though these concepts are incompatible. On the one hand, a Bourdieusian approach emphasises the role of social structures in shaping an individual's opportunities, with their actions heavily influenced by their habitus and capital, resulting in a limited scope for personal agency. On the other hand, critical moments suggest a more dynamic and psychological interaction with social structures, stressing the role of agency and the capacity to make choices in response to critical events. However, synthesising these concepts could offer a nuanced understanding of how individuals navigate their social worlds. While Bourdieu's theory underscores how social structures guide individual action, critical moments introduce the idea that pivotal events can serve as opportunities for

individuals to mobilise their capital in transformative ways. By integrating these perspectives, we can appreciate how critical moments act as catalysts that disrupt habitual, or indeed generational, patterns, allowing individuals to exercise agency within the structural limits of the social world. As a result, this could provide a useful framework for understanding how first-generation students negotiate their positions within social fields and enact change in their lives through participation in higher education.

2.5. Conclusions

This chapter has highlighted the differing approaches to capital and how it has been applied since Bourdieu's original works. It has led to the conclusion that time has not narrowed the concept to a single definition. Instead, scholars have expanded the concept to understand the ever-changing society we find ourselves in. Its international and discipline-diverse application demonstrates the flexibility of the concept and directs us to a position of seeing capital as being experienced through our subjective understandings. Since operationalising capital has proved difficult with differing results, this thesis will draw upon the many conceptions of capital discussed in this chapter. However, I will use them primarily only as heuristic devices (Reay, 2000) that allow us to examine data in more detailed ways (O'Shea, 2016).

Bourdieu's conceptualisation positions capital as something the privileged can use to gain an advantage in society. I acknowledge that first-generation students are perhaps a disruption to the power structure rather than a reproduction of it. Further, I have synthesised this Bourdieusian approach with that of 'critical moments' to suggest one possible way that first-generation students may disrupt patterns of social reproduction and enact transformational changes to their educational trajectories. I take the position that capital, as a concept, can help us to identify the mechanisms that enable engagement and participation in education for other groups and individuals. Coleman (1990, p. 302) argued that capital has a "limited fungibility" in that it may act as a positive resource in some contexts. However, in others, it could be useless or even detrimental. Therefore, we should understand capital as a generative mechanism through which we understand practice by means of understanding individual experience and the observable structure of the field we are operating within. Capital is subjective, and this research will consider how first-generation students experience capital in useful ways throughout their educational journey.

3. Chapter Three – Navigating Higher Education: Challenges and Successes of First-Generation Students

In the previous chapter, I outlined the conceptual lens through which the remainder of this thesis should be understood. In this, I argued that certain types of capital (with their relative value) are distributed unequally among the population and that capital can be used differently by different groups or individuals.

Chapter Three will now discuss a range of issues and debates from the extant research literature relevant to my study. In the first section, I will explore the unequal landscape of higher education participation for first-generation students and other underrepresented groups. Here, I will discuss inequalities in access and participation between more and less privileged students. As part of this discussion and section, I will continue my earlier discussion of the various definitions of 'first-generation' and other associated terms (such as social class and socioeconomic status) that have been identified in the literature and point to some of the complexities of accurately locating first-generation status within the research and policy landscapes. This first main section will highlight the importance of research that continues to tackle the structural inequalities that impact educational progression for many.

The subsequent sections of this chapter are organised to clearly reflect the aims of my research and the purpose of this thesis. Therefore, I will examine the literature pertinent to understanding the educational journeys of first-generation students. In particular, I will focus on the factors that influence engagement and participation in the educational field and how these factors complement or interrupt potential educational success. I organise my discussion to present this chronologically, representing three 'stages' of the academic journey in which I explore the prevalent themes identified in the associated literature that bear on at each stage. The three stages are:

- a) **Decision-Making and the Journey to University:** I will explore how educational progression and the decision-making process regarding university enrolment are intrinsically linked to familial background. This link extends beyond whether to apply to university and influences subject and institution choices;
- b) **Participation and the Undergraduate Experience:** I will consider how first-generation students navigate their undergraduate degrees and the factors affecting their successful participation. These influences constitute external factors, such as financing, and internal factors that impact their sense of inclusion; and
- c) **Academic and Wider Success Beyond Undergraduate Study:** I will outline the equity concerns and disadvantages that continue into postgraduate study and the

labour market for those from less privileged backgrounds. Further, I will outline the challenges postgraduate researchers face in adapting to a field where they become producers rather than consumers of knowledge. I suggest that first-generation students may find this particularly challenging, especially given the increasing neoliberal influences in the academy.

Presenting the literature this way highlights the trajectory of first-generation students' experiences within the education landscape. By examining the literature across these distinct stages, I aim to highlight the evolving challenges and opportunities encountered by this group. Approaching the research literature this way provides a nuanced exploration of the various influences on engagement and participation, enabling insights into how these dynamics either support or hinder academic success. Further, this lens not only provides an understanding of the factors influencing their educational journey but also underscores the dynamic nature of their experiences.

Finally, I will offer the rationale and aims for my research. In this section, I will conclude that the current research landscape in this field is vast and that a plethora of research explores the barriers to successful participation. Yet, little has been done to examine first-generation students' narratives of success through an approach that considers their educational journey in its entirety.

3.1. Access and Participation in Higher Education

In this section, I will begin to explore issues in higher education regarding access and participation. Often, these discourses in the UK focus on general notions of social mobility and economic growth rather than the experience of opportunities for participation and engagement in education for specific less privileged groups. As pointed to in Chapter One, the need to improve university access has been prevalent in governmental policies and agendas for several years. The widening participation agenda has focused on improving access for those 'under-represented' in higher education. This section will contextualise the arena whereby first-generation students belong to the under-represented categories that are often the focus of these reports. Firstly, I will explore the available data on access rates. Consequently, I argue that whilst the massification of higher education has undoubtedly aided more young people in studying at university, the widening participation agenda seems to have made only modest improvements in reducing the gap in attendance between the most and least advantaged. Secondly, I will discuss the various definitions of 'first-generation' and other associated terms in connection with social class and socioeconomic status.

3.1.1. The Complexities of Measuring Access

It has been well documented that considerable differences exist in access to high-status education for particular social groups. More specifically, differences have been evidenced based on socioeconomic status, with those from the least privileged backgrounds being held in place at least in part by the limitations of lower-status education (Johnson et al., 2010; Reay, 2013). This highlights that access to education can be impacted by social positioning and that assumptions around the connection between ability and merit are contrived, as discussed below. Whilst the widening participation agenda has undoubtedly increased access to higher education for many people, including those from less privileged backgrounds, in absolute terms, there remains a gap in participation in relative terms between those from different backgrounds. What is also problematic with this is the unequal distribution of perceived quality and quantity of education, with varying types of resources and support available dependent on one's position in the social field.

One of the principles portrayed in governmental policies suggests that a university is a place where anyone with academic ability and motivation can access and be successful in the educational field. Further, that university can act as a meritocratic filter between the position you are born into and your eventual adult social position. This perception that the reward of success is based on inherent capability has been challenged; instead, success is less about individual motivations, ability, or competence but more a by-product of the divisive impact of social inequality (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). The term 'meritocracy' was first introduced by Michael Young to describe a society that develops based on education attainment and intelligence testing (Young, 1958). This means that the perception that people should be able to progress based on merit (i.e., their educational achievements rather than other factors associated with wealth and prestige) has become a positive concept in academic rhetoric as something to aspire towards (Liu, 2011) even though this was not Young's intent. However, understanding educational success through this lens can be problematic as it positions those who do not participate or succeed as lacking individual effort, ability, or motivation. Not only does this legitimise personal failures, but also the failure of certain socioeconomic groups, as well as the failure of institutions to enable participation.

Universities are framed as places for increasing social mobility, but this 'guarantee' can be problematic. Social mobility is the likelihood of people climbing the socioeconomic ladder or how a generation fairs compared to their parents (Major & Weiner, 2021). The Sutton Trust has undertaken substantial reviews of social mobility considering several measures, including parental education, progression into professional occupations, intergenerational income and wealth, housing ownership, and family environment. A recent report argued that

whichever measure you use, "the UK is associated with particularly stark intergenerational persistence of poverty and privilege" and suggests that despite increasing numbers entering higher education, so far, education has not acted as the social leveller promised in governmental policies (Eyles et al., 2022, p. 37). Such divisions are argued to manifest in the unequal distribution of resources and educational mechanisms, which tend to favour the characteristics held by the most socioeconomically advantaged. Therefore, the future societal positions arrived at by people are not necessarily reached on the virtue of merit but, by and large, on an intergenerational advantage (or, indeed, disadvantage) created by their socioeconomic position (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007).

In the UK, several indicators have been used to measure unequal access to higher education on the geographic, school, and individual levels; however, it is difficult to ascertain where first-generation students fit into these measures. Factors such as participation of local areas (POLAR) and, more recently, an advanced measure of tracking underrepresentation by area (TUNDRA) track participation in higher education by location to reduce the disparity between high and low participation areas, *assuming* that those in low participation areas are socioeconomically disadvantaged. School-level factors, such as attendance at state-funded versus private fee-paying schools and attendance at low-achievement or low-progression schools, have also been used as markers of disadvantage. However, both area-based and school-level indicators have been criticised by Boliver et al. (2022) for their imprecision in identifying individual disadvantages and, therefore, being unsuitable for targeting and monitoring widening participation agendas.

Other factors, such as whether a child received free school meals (FSM), have been argued to be a more reliable indicator of individual-level socioeconomic disadvantage (Boliver et al., 2022). Longitudinal data published by the Office for National Statistics found that those receiving FSM were considerably less likely to go to university and more likely to earn a lower salary by age thirty, regardless of the level of their highest qualification (ONS, 2022). This further problematises the rhetoric that university attendance leads to social mobility for all participants. Furthermore, the Office for National Statistics developed the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) as a tool (most recently rebased in 2020) for conceptual understandings of the structure of society and the differing individual social behaviours and disadvantages said to be associated with three classes (ONS, 2016b). It is an occupationally based classification and has been linked quite closely to association with different social classes (the association to social class will be discussed further in the next section).

Analysis based on the NS-SEC highlights a generally steady increase in the numbers of those accessing higher education across the board, yet what remains is a gap between those from backgrounds with higher/lower managerial and professional occupations and those from semi-routine/routine occupations (HESA, 2023; Wakeling & Laurison, 2017). Data retrieved from HESA (2023) show that of all full-time undergraduate enrolments for the academic year 2021/22, 51% were from higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations, 27% were from intermediate occupations, 21% were from routine and manual occupations, and only 1% from those who had never worked or were long-term unemployed – these numbers have remained consistent over the last five year period (2017/18 to 2021/22). These figures show the proportionate overrepresentation of people from higher classes; there is an inverse relationship in that the lower down the scale, the lesser participation. This data source does not show the same characteristic breakdown for part-time undergraduate or postgraduate students.

Parental education level is a crucial factor in the progression of their children to higher education (Dunnett et al., 2012; Reay, 2005), and it is argued that this can often be a much more significant predictor of continuation than issues directly associated with income and occupation (though it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate these categories). This echoes capital theory predictions as the ability of individuals to inherit culturally valued capital from their parents is related to the types of cultural capital prevalent in their families. Data from the Office for Students (OfS, 2023) offers a more nuanced insight into higher education access, specifically for first-generation students. In Table 1, I present data captured using their student characteristic data dashboard, and it shows the figure and percentage for those who were enrolled on undergraduate courses over five academic years (2015/16 to 2019/20). The data in Table 1 are broken down by full-time and part-time mode of study and whether the parent held a higher education qualification. I have included the figures for those without response or the data deemed not applicable. However, it is unclear from the data source what constituted the non-applicable category. I included these figures to ensure a transparent representation of the data. Table 1 shows that fewer first-generation students are enrolled in undergraduate courses than their counterparts, which has remained relatively consistent over the five years. However, for part-time students, a higher proportion of them are first-generation students, which may suggest there are factors which affect their ability to undertake full-time study. Over the five years, there has been a slight shift towards first-generation students undertaking part-time rather than full-time study.

Table 1

Enrolment in undergraduate programmes by mode of study (full-time/part-time) and higher education qualification held by parent(s)

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Full-time Undergraduate					
Higher education qualifications held	512,910 (53.9%)	533,710 (54.0%)	548,670 (54.2%)	562,730 (54.6%)	574,980 (54.5%)
Higher education qualification not held	437,840 (46.1%)	455,410 (46.0%)	463,250 (45.8%)	468,810 (45.4%)	479,220 (45.5%)
No response	244,440	244,930	250,510	257,800	278,210
Not applicable	115,610	117,410	122,840	122,120	119,960
Part-time Undergraduate					
Higher education qualifications held	59,970 (38.5%)	55,290 (38.4%)	50,680 (38.3%)	49,100 (38.0%)	49,840 (37.9%)
Higher education qualification not held	95,950 (61.5%)	88,630 (61.6%)	81,570 (61.7%)	79,990 (62.0%)	81,640 (62.1%)
No response	83,790	75,650	70,750	71,440	70,780
Not applicable	33,080	30,520	29,380	26,510	23,630

Insofar as I can conclude from the figures presented so far, it seems that the expansion of higher education has increased the participation of underrepresented groupings, such as those from routine and manual occupations and first-generation students. However, the mass expansion has also increased participation from higher and intermediate socioeconomic groups and continuing-generation students. Therefore, there persists an overrepresentation of these groups compared to routine and manual groups or first-generation students. Notably, there is a relatively higher proportion of first-generation students at the part-time undergraduate level, though the numbers are comparably smaller than for full-time. Part-time study has been reported to be typical of those who are female, of mature age, have dependents or other caring responsibilities, are in employment, on vocational courses, or come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Goodchild, 2019; MillionPlus & NUS, 2013; Pollard et al., 2012). Goodchild (2019) found that part-time students under the age of thirty were more likely to be the first in their family to go to university and argued that it is expected that those over this age were following their children into higher education (thus, were not considered first-generation). As such, first-generation students (and some other underrepresented groups) may choose part-time study to manage other familial or financial commitments simultaneously.

However, the landscape of postgraduate study looks slightly different, though similar trends relating to the mode of study are present. In Tables 2 and 3, I present data which have been captured from the Office for Students in the same way as above but about postgraduate taught and postgraduate research enrolment (OfS, 2023). Tables 2 and 3 show that for full-time research and taught programmes, there are considerably fewer first-generation students than their counterparts enrolled across the five years, though this has steadily risen. For the taught programmes, the increase in the academic year 2016/17 could be accounted for by the introduction of master's loans in 2016 and similarly for the research programmes in the academic year 2018/19 by the introduction of doctoral loans in 2018. Whilst the increase for taught programmes has been rather stark over the five years, a similar increase has yet to be reflected for research programmes. What remains is that those from less privileged backgrounds are less likely to progress to postgraduate study, and a report by Wakeling and Mateos-González (2021) argued that this was the case whether measuring privilege based on parental occupation, parental education, neighbourhood, or type of school attended. At the time of writing, I am unaware of a UK data source demonstrating whether continuing-generation students have parents with a postgraduate degree or not. This type of data would help to clarify these trends.

Research considering notions of inequality in education has focused chiefly on discussions of socioeconomic disadvantage, social class, and types of school attended, individually and in how the associated categories connect. Whilst some of these factors may correlate with being first-generation, they cannot be used as proxies for each other. For example, receiving free school meals likely means you will also be first-generation, but not all first-generation students will have received free school meals. The widening participation agenda has widened participation but has not yet, apparently, dented inequalities in higher education access, experiences, and outcomes. It also seems that inequalities have been maintained in new ways with the government's recent labelling of "low-value" degrees (DfE, 2023b). The government's plans to cap places on courses that they do not deem to return the required economic growth (i.e., graduates who are not earning enough after five years to start repaying student loans) may well impact access to university for underrepresented groups.

What has been demonstrated to this point is the context within which equity research in education has been conducted, as well as the complexities that arise from a targeted policy aimed at including more of the population with university applications. In the following section, I will further discuss the intricacies of conducting research and reviewing the literature in the vast field of educational inequality.

Table 2

Enrolment in postgraduate research programmes by mode of study (full-time/part-time) and higher education qualification held by parent(s)

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Full-time Postgraduate Research					
Higher education qualifications held	17,270 (65.2%)	17,960 (65.7%)	18,090 (65.4%)	18,300 (64.6%)	18,730 (64.4%)
Higher education qualification not held	9,210 (34.8%)	9,390 (34.3%)	9,570 (34.6%)	10,020 (35.4%)	10,360 (35.6%)
No response	44,620	45,550	45,050	45,560	45,290
Part-time Postgraduate Research					
Higher education qualifications held	6,240 (50.5%)	6,500 (50.8%)	6,620 (51.0%)	6,760 (51.5%)	6,850 (51.7%)
Higher education qualification not held	6,120 (49.5%)	6,300 (49.2%)	6,370 (49.0%)	6,360 (48.5%)	6,400 (48.3%)
No response	13,850	13,070	12,730	12,480	12,330

Table 3

Enrolment in postgraduate taught programmes by mode of study (full-time/part-time) and higher education qualification held by parent(s)

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Full-time Postgraduate Taught					
Higher education qualifications held	68,800 (68.7%)	69,970 (65.9%)	75,210 (64.1%)	79,200 (63.3%)	91,650 (62.7%)
Higher education qualification not held	31,360 (31.3%)	36,270 (34.1%)	42,200 (35.9%)	45,910 (36.7%)	54,410 (37.3%)
No response	131,120	145,370	158,710	173,650	195,550
Part-time Postgraduate Taught					
Higher education qualifications held	30,520 (52.0%)	31,300 (50.5%)	31,490 (49.9%)	31,910 (49.7%)	31,410 (49.6%)
Higher education qualification not held	28,210 (48.0%)	30,630 (49.5%)	31,610 (50.1%)	32,230 (50.3%)	31,960 (50.4%)
No response	52,510	51,090	52,800	55,350	56,020

3.1.2. *The Complexities of Defining 'First-Generation'*

What is clear from the previous section is that both governmental reports and academia use several terms when discussing unequal access to higher education. Terms such as 'disadvantaged', 'underrepresented', 'less privileged', 'low socioeconomic status', 'non-traditional', and 'working-class' all refer to those less likely to attend university than their opposites. Whilst many of those who are categorised in this way are likely also first-generation students, the terms are not synonymous, and as researchers, we should be careful not to conflate the terms. Not all working-class people will be/become first-generation students, and not all first-generation students are/are from working-class backgrounds. This section will begin by exploring the variations of the term first-generation. I will then consider how this interconnects with socioeconomic status and social class measures to argue for a more heterogeneous understanding of those targeted by the widening participation agenda.

Within the literature, several terms are used when discussing the groups of students who are the first in their families to attend university. There is a trend in the USA to call this group 'first-generation' (such as Azmitia et al., 2018; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018; Stephens et al., 2012), whereas research in Australia tends to use the term 'first in family' students (such as Mann, 2016; O'Shea, 2015). Whilst there is some reference to 'first-generation', research in the UK tends to focus on much broader characterisations relating to social class, socioeconomic status, or 'non-traditional' (such as Bathmaker et al., 2013; Burke et al., 2019; Reay et al., 2010) often presenting these terms as a proxy for first-generation status. This term variation causes issues in conducting a complete and comprehensive literature review, but more problematic is the variety of ways in which this group of students are defined. This is because, in this thesis, I analyse participation through the capital lens, so access to the relevant higher education capital is essential. The assumptions underpinning the term are linked to the types of knowledge, confidence, and comfort they experience in university, which are indeed affected by the type, quantity, and quality of resources inherited due to their parent's level of education (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). Yet several definitions specify the level of parental education obtained and the inclusion of other immediate family members. Given this variation, a diverse range of realities is likely experienced by those categorised in this group.

A common criterion for this group is those studying for an undergraduate degree and parents who have not studied at this level (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). However, the definitions range from the notion of neither parent having obtained a bachelor's degree (Strayhorn, 2007) to the more specific notion that no immediate family member has attended a university, either two-year or four-year, with or without having earned a degree (Inman &

Mayes, 2016). This is a phenomenon specific to the USA whereby they have two-year and four-year colleges - two years is an Associate degree, and four years is a Bachelor's degree. Yet other research has identified this group as those whose parents have not received education beyond secondary school (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Hahs-Vaughn, 2004) rather than making specifications regarding university attendance. These variations are especially prevalent in the literature based in the USA.

It has been highlighted that there needs to be more consensus in defining this group of students, with variation over who is classed as a parent, how many of their parents did not attend university, whether they attended but did not complete a degree, and the type of institution attended (Toutkoushian et al., 2019). A further variation is to what extent they include other immediate family members in their classification, which seems most prominent in Australian literature. For example, O'Shea (2016) defines this group as "no one in the immediate family of origin, including siblings or parents having previously attended a university or having completed a university degree" (p. 61). Further research has included partners and children in this definition (O'Shea et al., 2016), which seems most appropriate in discussions of mature-age students. The inconsistency in these definitions makes drawing direct comparisons between datasets and analyses difficult.

There is a tendency, especially in quantitative approaches, to draw arbitrary comparisons between the first in their family to go to university and those who are not. By this, I mean that generalised conclusions are drawn based on whether you are or are not a first-generation student; the problem with this dichotomy is that it needs to be revised to fully understand the plethora of individual experiences of those in each grouping. With such differing characterisations of first-generation status, it is difficult to conclude the nature of the group (Toutkoushian et al., 2019). Comparing these two groups could provide some general valuable comparisons if a unified definition was determined, but it also gives the impression that the two separate groups are homogenous within. However, there is no single standard first-generation experience, and drawing direct quantitative comparisons can conceal other influential variables such as political or social identities and available capital resources (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). The notion that no unified use of the term calls into question its usefulness for understanding this group of students. Without a unified definition, some caution may need to be taken by those drawing conclusions from large comparative data sets. Where research in this area can be advanced is through careful consideration of how students are grouped and what intersections exist between them, as well as what relationship they hold with wider power structures and specific institutions (Nguyen &

Nguyen, 2018). In doing this, it may be necessary to consider shifting the meaning from an arbitrary categorisation to one about expectations of participation and belonging.

The tendency in UK literature to focus on social class is to see the first-generation status as a proxy for being working-class and vice versa. These groups often overlap, but it is important to note that social class divisions do not necessarily define first-generation status, and conflating the two can shift the lens from parental education to parental occupation. To clarify, I demonstrate here on what basis different social classes are defined so that comparisons between the groups can be made; drawing the objective boundaries of social class divisions is often based on measurable lines such as the NS-SEC (referred to in the previous section) whereby certain occupations occupy different social groups. The NS-SEC is the most widely validated measure of social class (Savage et al., 2013). Still, these objective measures often need to pay more attention to how social class is defined through participants' complex subjective and lived experiences (Loveday, 2015).

There are eight classes within the NS-SEC, which can be found in Table 4 - the occupation examples provided in the table were sourced from Drever et al. (2004) and Friedman and Laurison (2019); I have adapted their tables to present similar examples here. In their research on social mobility and the pay gap in elite occupations, Friedman and Laurison (2019) identify three broad social class origin groups based on the NS-SEC: professional or managerial (classifications 1-2), Intermediate (classifications 3-5), and working-class (classifications 6-8). However, the Office for National Statistics presents the NS-SEC as being only concerned with employers, employees, and self-employed, seeking to move away from the old manual/non-manual divide, offering a simplified three-class system consisting of higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations (classifications 1-2), Intermediate occupations (classifications 3-4), routine and manual occupations (classifications 5-7), choosing to exclude the never worked and long-term unemployed from the class structure (ONS, 2016b).

These differences in mapping social class highlight that drawing conclusions on belonging to the social class backgrounds frequently discussed in sociological research – that of the working-class, middle-class, and upper-class – based on the occupational background of the parent can be problematic. However, these measures can provide a somewhat broad understanding of the landscape of those who enter higher education based on the classes identified in the NS-SEC.

Table 4*National Statistics Socio-economic Classifications with occupational examples*

NS-SEC Class	Occupation Examples
1. Higher managerial, administrative, and professional occupations 1.1. Large employers and higher managerial and administrative occupations 1.2. Higher professional occupations	CEO, senior members of government, medical practitioners, professor
2. Lower managerial, administrative, and professional occupations	Teachers, paramedics, newspaper editors, journalists, store managers, IT consultant
3. Intermediate occupations	Police officers (sergeant and below), travel agents, graphic designers, bookkeepers
4. Small employers and own account workers	Hotel managers, farmers, roofers, taxi drivers, hairdressers
5. Lower supervisory and technical occupations	Electricians, train drivers, road construction operatives, chef
6. Semi-routine occupations	Farm workers, dental nurses, scaffolders, traffic wardens, retail assistants, care worker
7. Routine occupations	Butchers, cleaners, servers, labourers in the building trade, truck driver
8. Never worked and long-term unemployed	N/A
*Not classified	*Full-time students, occupation not stated or inadequately described

The subjective experience of the social class goes beyond this simple identification and is integral to how life is experienced and acted upon. Bourdieu (1990b) argues that social class is about the way individuals and groups are defined “not only by what they are but by what they are reputed to be” (p. 135), along the lines of common material and symbolic properties and in relation to each other. Social class is “something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your reflexes, in your psyche, at the very core of your being’ (Kuhn, 1995, p. 98). It impacts material wealth and economic security but also influences access to knowledge, resources, relationships, experiences, education, and practices, leading to a fulfilling life (Sayer, 2005). It is experienced differently by individuals, and therefore, it is also essential not to consider each social class as a homogenous group and instead use this classification as only a careful generalisation of the relationship between experience and life outcomes. Thus, attention should be paid to the cultural aspects of social class to understand how forms of behaviour and knowledge are legitimated (Loveday, 2015).

With this in mind, Savage et al. (2013) developed a new model of social class which did not intend to compete with the NS-SEC to provide a better occupation-based measure of social class but instead to develop a model representing the cultural and social aspects that make up class divisions in the UK. Their analysis of the BBC's Great British Class Survey (GBCS) of 161,400 respondents identified five additional social classes to the traditional middle-class and working-class groups, which are prevalent in sociological thinking. The survey and analysis were completed by drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986), and Savage et al. (2013) argue that different levels of these capitals can combine to produce classed boundaries. This is a helpful way of viewing inequality not based on income and occupation divisions but on the interplay between economic, cultural and social capital (Bennett et al., 2008). Table 5 presents these seven classes and is an adaptation of the findings from Savage et al. (2013).

This model considers more than just occupation and measures of income; it reflects on the complexities of social and cultural aspects in society that help reinforce unequal divisions in multidimensional ways. Savage et al. (2013) further identify the disparity between those with university degrees across social class groups. They found that the elite have the highest number of graduates with 56%, followed by the established middle class with 43% compared with the new affluent workers and the traditional working class who both had 11%, and the precariat had the lowest number with only 3% who were graduates. This only adds credence to the argument that capital resources and access to higher education are unequally distributed across society; however, focusing on capital resources and understanding their distribution and mechanisms can help us further understand the nuances of experience and participation.

Both government policies and academia discuss 'non-traditional' students as the under-represented groups targeted by the widening participation agenda. Students who are the first in their family to go to university only make up part of this group (alongside other groups based on age, economic status, ethnicity, etc.), so using this term as a proxy for first-generation is unhelpful in understanding the nuances that come specifically to this group. Non-traditional refers to those who have tended to be excluded from the white middle-class domain of the university environment. Such tendencies to draw dichotomies and focus on the furthest edges of advantage and disadvantage may lead to an absence of understanding of those sitting in between. This raises the question of where first-generation students sit on the spectrum between the most advantaged and the most disadvantaged.

Table 5*Model of social class adapted from the Great British Class Survey*

Social class	Example occupations	Description
Elite	CEO, barristers and judges, dental practitioners	Very high economic capital (especially savings), high social capital, very high highbrow cultural capital
Established middle class	Electrical engineers, midwives, quality assurance and regulatory professionals	High economic capital, high status of mean contacts, high highbrow, and emerging cultural capital
Technical middle class	Aircraft pilots, higher education teachers, pharmacists	High economic capital, very high mean social contacts, but relatively few contacts reported, moderate cultural capital
New affluent workers	Plumbers, housing officers, sales and retail assistants	Moderately good economic capital, the moderately poor mean score of social contacts, though high range, moderate highbrow but good emerging cultural capital
Traditional working class	Secretaries, cleaners, van drivers, care workers	Moderately poor economic capital, though with reasonable house prices, few social contacts, low highbrow and emerging cultural capital
Emergent service workers	Bar staff, customer service occupations, nursing assistants, chefs	Moderately poor economic capital, though with reasonable household income, moderate social contacts, high emerging (but low highbrow) cultural capital
Precariat	Carpenters and joiners, caretakers, leisure, and travel service occupations	Poor economic capital and the lowest scores on every other criterion

This notion of a “missing middle” has been noted in sociology and youth studies research (Byrne, 2005, p. 809; Roberts, 2011). The literature on youth transitions has recently had a renewed focus on those who sit in the middle of the most advantaged and disadvantaged, that is, those who are not bound for university or those who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) (Irwin, 2021). Byrne (2005) previously reflected on several articles brought together in a special issue of *‘Sociology’* and noted an increasing prevalence of those who were neither working-class nor middle-class. Although his research focused on youths not at university, Roberts (2011) notes a “forgotten section of the working class” (i.e.,

an upper working class) that does not fit with the polarised view of the class structure. Looking at this through a broader lens would help us more fully understand the possibilities that the most disadvantaged are excluded from and, in turn, understand the forms of resistance experienced in relation to more successful transitions (Roberts & Macdonald, 2013).

In his discussion of capital acquisition, Burke (2016) suggests the notion of a “converted working class” (p. 17) whereby one may be characterised as working-class based on measures such as the NS-SEC yet have accessed higher education and progressed into graduate employment. He argues that these students are enabled to do so by exchanging capitals, which are “context-specific”, allowing them to alter their position in social space (Burke, 2016, p. 20). Furthermore, Jack (2016) argues that the heterogeneity of low-income students who progress into higher education is often overlooked, with some such students having acquired cultural capital depending on their previous educational experience. He goes on to differentiate between the “privileged poor” – low-income students who attended elite (usually private and selective fee-paying) institutions before university – and the “doubly disadvantaged” – low-income students who attended their local community school – suggesting that some of the barriers faced by low-income students can be mitigated by attending elite schools as they provide the crucial cultural and social capital needed to navigate the university environment successfully (Jack, 2016, p. 2). This suggests that exploring the acquisition and exchange of capital is a useful endeavour (and addition to approaches that focus more simply on bald working-class/middle-class dichotomies) in our efforts to understand the intricacies of the reproduction of inequalities and how some people from disadvantaged and working-class origins seem to be able to ‘buck the trend’ and enjoy greater educational success than might have been predicted.

Section Summary

The widening participation agenda has had variable success in understanding the experiences of the groups of students that the policy targets. This could be because it cannot replace the generation of capital, much of which seems to be gathered at a familial level. Expanding the funding system may have gone towards reducing the barriers that occur through the lack of economic capital. However, more is needed to address the cultural and social resources required to access and be successful in the educational environment. Furthermore, it is evident that first-generation status is understood in various ways, leading to variations in its definition and association with other ‘disadvantaged’ groups. This diversity complicates not only the literature review process but also our understanding of their unique experiences of participation and engagement in higher education.

Success in education cannot just be understood as an individual achievement but rather as a distributed one - the extent to which individuals are allowed access to education through policy or practice. The forthcoming sections, therefore, will focus on that specific to first-generation students, drawing on literature that considers social class and socioeconomic differences but being careful not to conflate the terms. This thesis does not intend to review the history of social class in education thoroughly. However, it is acknowledged that any current state of knowledge must be placed within its political and historical context. What is clear is the importance of broader notions of social class in the decision-making process about participation in non-compulsory education. However, this thesis will focus more specifically on the unequal distribution of capital in relation to first-generation students. I will adopt the definition of first-generation as proposed by O'Shea (2016), which identifies a first-generation student as someone whereby no one in their immediate family, including parents and siblings, has attended university or completed a degree.

3.2. Decision-Making and the Journey to University

In this section, I will explore the literature on decision-making for first-generation students entering undergraduate study. There is a careful use of the term 'decision-making' rather than 'choice' as choice signifies a logical and rational process; however, decision-making for these students is instead emotional and has repercussions for both the learner and their families (Ball et al., 2002; O'Shea, 2019). I will consider how not only parental expectations and decisions to apply for university are bound up with one's family background and parental education but also their process for settling on an appropriate institution and subject. Further, other social influences, such as peers and schools, and careful considerations over the economic and cultural costs of going to university are conscious parts of the decision-making process. Aside from the external factors, several internal motivations arise from their family background, which is crucial to deciding whether to enter the higher education environment.

3.2.1. Expectations of University Attendance

The decision-making process when entering higher education is complex, and it varies for those from different backgrounds depending on the types of capital one has access to. Expectations and aspirations are critical influencing factors when making decisions about going to university, and these have been found to vary across social class and first- and continuing-generation (those with a history of higher education in their family) status. It has been argued that for middle-class students (with a family history of university attendance), decisions are implicit and, therefore, non-decisions since it is taken for granted that they will

go to university; the decision is mainly about which prestigious university to attend, however, progression for working-class students with no university experience in the family is more uncertain, and decision-making is a much more deliberate and complex process (Ball et al., 2002; Irwin, 2018). Similar notions were echoed by Burke (2019), who argued that these marked differences between the expectations and aspirations of working and middle-class young people are important as “a sense of what an individual perceives she or he can achieve is crucial in determining their trajectory” (p. 45). Thus, decision-making for many may be emotional and imbued more with dispositions and perceptions than with a rational risk/benefit analysis (Tarabini, 2019).

In their research, which aimed to understand the influential factors on university attendance, Hunt et al. (2018) found that significantly fewer first-generation students (40%) than continuing students (75%) stated their parents' expectations as a reason for applying. Whilst this research is specific to Design and Engineering students in a particular institution, it goes somewhat towards demonstrating the differing levels of parental expectation experienced by students. Bathmaker et al. (2016) offer a more qualitative exploration of university expectations based on their 'Paired Peers' project, in which they considered the differences between working-class and middle-class students in two universities. They found that university expectations were common amongst their middle-class participants; this expectation was “sometimes explicitly stated by parents and sometimes an unspoken expectation” (Bathmaker et al., 2016, p. 56). On the other hand, the parents of their working-class participants took a more “laissez-faire approach to the decision-making process”, and they were less influential because they did not have a university experience to draw on (Bathmaker et al., 2016, p. 57). This suggests that the embodied cultural capital of those with a family history of higher education fosters a view of university as an expected and natural trajectory. For those without a university history in their families, and thus less embodied cultural capital relating to education, their parents do not foster the same expectations. This highlights the impact differing capital levels can have on decision-making around university enrolment.

Parental engagement with early schooling also differs depending on family background. This engagement commonly involves practical support such as engaging with homework, working on projects, or attending parents' evenings. The value these actions are perceived to have is a crucial aspect of engagement, whereby parents who see these as a critical part of being a caring and responsible parent are more likely to be involved (Harris & Goodall, 2008). Harris and Goodall (2008) further found that young learners placed more value on receiving moral support from their parents than practical support, encouraging them to be well-behaved and

achieve academically. However, barriers to parental engagement are particularly prominent in working-class mothers, whereby the emotional labour that goes into helping with homework and other engagement activities is impeded by time, resources, and knowledge limitations (Hutchison, 2012; Reay, 2000). Bourdieu (1990b) argued that these routine practices constitute a specific habitus vital for engagement with formal education. This type of socialisation through the family habitus contributes to familiarity with school-valued attributes, which are most commonly associated with middle-class families (Loh & Sun, 2020). Whilst there is no scope here to review the literature around parental engagement with early schooling thoroughly, there is little doubt that such involvement has a direct and positive impact on young learners and the expectations of their educational trajectory.

Positive attitudes towards education are associated with the level of parental education, with mothers who have an additional year of post-compulsory schooling being more likely to demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviours towards education (Feinstein & Sabates, 2006). This suggests that the level of education attained by parents impacts the way they value education, affecting how they engage with their children's education and, ultimately, how children view education. This can be extended to the higher education environment whereby the index of social advantage, which captures parental university experience and family encouragement to attend university, is significantly and positively related to planned higher education participation (Callender & Mason, 2017). This suggests that access to the types of social and cultural capital intrinsic to successful higher education enrolment may be available in more significant quantities to those with a family history of university attendance. However, it does not indicate the relative importance of economic capital in the family.

Earlier research found that working-class parents have little involvement in decisions around going to university and perceived this as a betrayal of their roots (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Priebe et al., 2008). However, more recently, it has been argued that parents are vital influencers in promoting education and aspirations for social mobility. Whilst parental education levels may be limited, some young people can internalise their parents' work ethic without internalising the educational limitations of their parents' upbringing (Patfield et al., 2021). In his research on first-generation students and their parents, Rondini (2016) noted that the student participants were aware of the meritocracy paradigm and its promises (outlined earlier in this thesis) but recognised their parents' hard work had not led to economic gains, leading parents to see their children's educational pursuits as a means to redeem the perceived failings of previous generations. As a result, the parents framed their involvement in their children's decisions as "primarily a matter of engaging in "better" decision-making than their own" (Rondini, 2016, p. 112). Such tendencies to place value on

education as the perceived route to greater opportunities and future social mobility results in general support for their children to attend university (Gofen, 2009). Although this link between attendance at university and social mobility is debated, this perception has been further amplified through the mass expansion of higher education and the normalisation of university as a route for more of the population.

It is not necessarily useful to perceive first-generation students as succeeding in education *despite* their family background. Instead, we should see first-generation students as succeeding because of it. Fundamental research by Gofen (2009) found that parents' attitudes towards education were important, encouraging their children not to be like them. This encouragement was done through daily prioritising of education and providing necessary resources to enable their participation in education. Further, research looking at young people's post-16 education aspirations suggests that those from working-class backgrounds do not lack aspiration but are far less likely to access the necessary resources from their family relationships that would allow them to achieve their ambitions (Archer et al., 2013). Instead, influence from parents comes in the form of encouraging their child to aspire for a better career than them, or more generally, "to do better than they did" (Archer et al., 2013, p. 70). Whilst this suggests equity issues in the types of resources some families hold, it offers a crucial move away from understanding first-generation students in the context of a deficient family upbringing. Instead, it moves towards seeing the family as a vital influence and motivator for first-generation students.

Whilst it has been found that there is often little talk of university in the home for first-generation students, research in Australia has found that discourses around betterment and opportunity are shared between the learners and their families. These positive discussions within the family environment have "both motivated these learners and also strategically positioned the university as an opportunity for better future choices" (O'Shea et al., 2016, p. 1027). This suggests that parents and families are fundamental for first-generation students to aspire towards greater social mobility and a more secure future. Also, family members were often heavily invested in their children's education since they could live out generational aspirations of their missed opportunities (Gofen, 2009; O'Shea, 2016). As Yosso (2005) puts it, families and learners "dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances, often without the objective means to attain those goals" (p. 78), suggesting that it is not the lack of aspiration that has prevented them from becoming socially mobile but the types of capital and the associated habitus inherent in doing so (Morris, 2015).

First-generation students have been found to be much more outcome-focused in decision-making around going to university than continuing-generation students. They are also much

less likely to state that their peer group or making new friends and enjoying the social aspects of university factored highly in their decisions when applying to university (Hunt et al., 2018). What is much more pronounced is a focus on graduate employment and future financial benefits, seeing university as a “necessary instrumentalism” for achieving professional career goals (Lehmann, 2012, p. 208). However, O’Shea et al. (2016) argue that the emphasis on money after university may reflect the university’s agenda more than the student, and focusing on this potentially misses the developmental and experiential benefits of attending university. As has been highlighted in this sub-section, decision-making for first-generation students is also tied up with notions of achieving ‘better’ outcomes than their parents (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Rondini, 2016) or wanting to “escape from an area” which seemed to offer few opportunities (Bathmaker et al., 2016, p. 55). As such, it appears that first-generation students perceive university (and its associated qualifications) as the route to becoming socially mobile, and this forms a crucial part of the decision-making process.

3.2.2. Factors Influencing Subject and Institution Decisions

Family background also influences decision-making about the types of institutions attended and the subject that is studied. First-generation and working-class students have generally been found to study less ‘prestigious’ courses at less ‘prestigious’ universities, as is also the case for some ethnic minority groups (Henderson, 2019; Reay et al., 2001). Whilst the number of first-generation students reaching the most prestigious universities has increased since the widening participation agenda, there remains a gap between them and their more advantaged counterparts. The term prestige in this context is often characterised by university league tables or by purely being part of the ‘Golden Triangle’ (hosting the ‘elite’ universities in southern England) or the Russell Group (hosting 24 research-intensive UK universities), groups which are perceived as hosting the UK’s ‘best’ institutions. Such assertions are contested in academia, that by and large, the prestige given by membership to this group is based on *perceptions* of prestige rather than objective measures (Blackmore, 2016). Evaluating how universities are ranked would be its own research project; however, relying heavily on subjective criteria and arbitrary weightings means they do not reflect or benefit activities such as teaching and learning or community engagement and instead focus on reputational rankings (McKenna, 2020). It also makes it difficult for students to evaluate which institution is right for them, as what is considered ‘best’ for one student might not be the ‘best’ for another.

Decision-making about going to university and which university to attend appears in the literature to be closely bound with social identity and the notion of ‘fitting in’. Those from less

privileged backgrounds, including first-generation students, have been found to apply to institutions where they perceive people to be socially and culturally like them or where the arena is more aligned with their skills and talents (Jones, 2020). Furthermore, fitting in and seeing themselves there was more important to applicants than how 'good' the university was (Bathmaker et al., 2016). On the other hand, it has been suggested that working-class and ethnic minority students are sometimes put off in certain institutions with high proportions of students with a similar background as they perceive it as inadequate in their pursuit of social mobility (Reay et al., 2001). This further highlights the complexities of choosing the 'best' university to attend and problematises the notion that higher-status institutions are the best option for everyone. Instead, decisions are often tied up with notions of fitting in with the social and cultural aspects of the institution and their fellow students. In other words, how closely their 'habitus' aligns with that of the institution.

Furthermore, the choice of institution is also related to mobility decisions, such as whether to live at home and study locally or move away to a distant institution. Christie (2007) argues that many non-traditional students want to remain living at home due to economic, emotional, or family reasons, which means that moving away is "not an option" (p. 2451). Access to economic capital seems to play a pivotal role in the decision to stay living at home, with first-generation and non-traditional students doing so to reduce the cost of living and, in some cases, to maintain ties already formed in the labour market (Christie et al., 2005; Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005). However, others have emphasised different factors, with emotions and personal relationships pivotal in mobility decisions (Finn, 2013, 2017b) and localised and classed aspirations and cultural tastes (MacDonald & Marsh, 2005). This suggests that non-traditional students may be more likely to apply to local institutions because this decision aligns with their available capital resources and kinship with their family and community.

Schools are essential in expanding "the field of the possibles" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 104) by supporting capital acquisition and making critical connections to universities. For those with familial experience of higher education, the expectation of university attendance is unchallenged and reinforced by their peer and school environment (Winterton & Irwin, 2012). For those without, the school and peer relationships may prove to be more influential than their parents. In their research considering the decision-making processes of students from so-called 'low performing' schools and colleges (those in the lowest 40% of average attainment measured at age 18), Rose et al. (2019) found that the most significant influence came from to what extent the college or school had 'normalised' the concept of university. Those institutions that had provided opportunities for visits, onsite masterclasses, and

tutoring from current university students found they had higher applications to Russell Group universities from first-generation and less advantaged students as they felt more comfortable with university language and culture. For institutions that were less engaged with these activities, individuals were more likely to seek individual perspectives from tutors they met. As such, this provides a narrow view of the opportunities available to them rather than a broad understanding of possible options. These activities and messages beyond the curriculum have been characterised as the “hidden curriculum” that shapes the expectations of young people and their families (Donnelly, 2015, p. 86). This demonstrates the importance of accessing context-specific types of capital through the school environment where, perhaps, it has not been available at home. Given that low-performing schools are often located in less privileged areas, there is potential for a higher proportion of certain equity groups (such as first-generation students) to attend these schools. As such, the school seems to play a pivotal role in enabling access to the types of capital valued in higher education.

The impact of prior educational decision-making on young people’s entry into higher education is also noteworthy. Owing to a semi-hidden bias in university selection processes where certain more ‘traditional’ subjects are favoured over others, first-generation students are often automatically excluded from applying to Russell Group universities given their A Level subject choice. Many Russell Group university courses “require one or more facilitating subjects: Maths, Further Maths, English Literature, Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Geography, History, Modern and Classical Languages” (Rose et al., 2019, p. 864). Thus, those without access to the necessary knowledge about their A Level subject choice enter the process already on the back foot. This type of knowledge about higher education admittance is likely transmitted through the inherited cultural capital in some families; however, in others, this has been less well known.

What is more, there are differences by social background for GCSE subject choice whereby less advantaged young people are less likely to choose the subjects, which leads to the aforementioned facilitating subjects at A Level (Allen, 2015). Progress made in education before the GCSE level has also been shown to be poorer for those from less privileged backgrounds, resulting in lower levels of attainment and less chance of taking facilitating subjects at GCSE (Crawford et al., 2015; Dilnot, 2016). Drama, social sciences, and education (as a subject) are more prominent in state schools compared to more ‘academic’ choices in private schools (Reay et al., 2001). As mentioned, I do not assume that applying for a Russell Group university is a measure of success. Instead, I challenge such suppositions. However, this does suggest that potential disadvantage in the educational

trajectory of young people starts at a much earlier stage in their school lives and may impact the opportunity to apply for a Russell Group university should they decide to.

Research on first-generation students and subject choice varies internationally, but it is commonly suggested that first-generation students are much more instrumental in their approach. Students in the UK and USA tend to favour business studies, law, management, and health sciences and are more underrepresented in fine arts and humanities subjects (Davis, 2023; Henderson, 2019). Lehmann (2009) discussed how Canadian first-generation students were more likely to choose a subject with a profession in mind (i.e. lawyer, doctor, teacher), thereby seeing university as a highly qualified vocational training environment. In Germany, however, first-generation students seem over-represented in social sciences and education (as a subject), but lower levels in medical sciences (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013), whilst a much less instrumental approach, this has been suggested to be due to free tuition in Germany (Budd, 2016).

Parents of first-generation students also demonstrate an instrumental approach and have particular perspectives on the most appropriate subjects when deciding which to apply for. Rose et al. (2019) draw conclusions that whilst knowledge and advice from parents are limited, they tend to encourage their children to study more vocational or professional training subjects such as law and medicine with a clear profession available at the end “irrespective of participants academic passion or strengths” (p. 865). The authors suggest that this finding is relatively novel and may result from the ongoing impact of the rise in tuition fees, which requires a much more careful consideration of ‘worth’. Next, further discussions of the effects of tuition fees and cost/benefit analysis will be explored in more detail.

3.2.3. Weighing Up the Costs of University Attendance

The political, media, and academic rhetoric around the increase in tuition fees in the UK to £9000 in 2012 focuses on the economic burden of pursuing a degree, notably that the changes in the price of tuition fees and the student loan system will make it more difficult for young people, particularly those from less privileged backgrounds, to enter higher education. However, a growing body of research has questioned the impact that increasing tuition fee costs have had in deterring those from specific backgrounds from entering higher education, finding less of a fear and more of a sense of ambivalence towards student debt (Evans & Donnelly, 2018; Harrison et al., 2015). This is not to say that economic considerations are not involved but that such a focus on the ‘sticker price’ misses out on the many other factors at play and the perceived social and cultural costs that those without higher education

experiences in the family also consider. This difference between 'price' and 'cost' is more than mere semantics, as young people have been found to switch between discussing the perceived economic price and the broader social and cultural costs to their lifestyle and identity (Jones, 2014).

Tolerance for debt, in general, has been found to have increased between 2002 and 2015 (Callender & Mason, 2017), possibly reflecting broader government and policy structures of the mass expansion of higher education. In their survey of final-year school/college pupils, Callender and Mason (2017) saw an increase from 52% to 74% of participants who agreed that borrowing money to go to university was a good investment, as well as an increase in agreement that university meant they would get a well-paid job. However, the minority of students who maintained a debt-averse attitude were disproportionately from less privileged backgrounds, suggesting that whilst overall there was less aversion to debt, those from less advantaged backgrounds are the most likely to be deterred, potentially further widening the gap between them and the most privileged. A considerable influence on the reduction in debt aversion could be accounted for by the massification of higher education combined with the changes in the youth labour market, leaving young people "faced with limited alternatives for well-paid, secure work with progression prospects, higher education – even at a significantly higher cost and potentially reduced financial returns – has become a markedly less risky option in relative terms" (Harrison, 2018, p. 767). The question may then be not how risky university is but how the risk is perceived against the risk of not participating, with the lack of 'decent' alternatives that lead to careers. One of the biggest gambles is the investment and whether it will pay off by being better paid in the graduate labour market. It has been documented that this is one of the critical motivations for first-generation students when making firm decisions to enter higher education (Hunt et al., 2018). Such decisions, however, are unlikely to be based on a strict cost/benefit analysis, and as Brynin (2012) argues:

It is unlikely that many young people calculate the economic value of education relative to an expected career. They are likely instead to have a notion of a "good" job, which would partially be based on some (often vague) idea of expected pay but also on the job's prestige and the skills it requires (p. 285)

Within the financing system of going to university, many institutions offer bursaries on a means-tested basis, meaning that those from low-income backgrounds are often eligible to receive one. This is part of widening participation agendas to encourage those from less privileged backgrounds to enter higher education on the assumption that economic barriers are the leading cause of aversion. It has been found, however, that financial aid is not an important factor in whether to enter higher education (Callender & Mason, 2017; Callender &

Wilkinson, 2013), that bursaries are only a minimal factor in decision-making for those who are eligible for them (Harrison et al., 2018) and that the reputation of the university and course, location, social fit, and family/friendship ties were more important than the price of the course (Dunnett et al., 2012; Harrison et al., 2018). This suggests that the availability of economic capital is only a small part of the complex decision-making process and that the availability of social and cultural capital plays a significant role. Thus, as pointed to in the literature, research projects and policy strategies that target only economic costs may be missing other crucial factors considered by those from less privileged backgrounds. Where bursaries were found to have an influence was in terms of students' actual experiences whilst at university, enabling them to engage with their environment in different ways. However, this will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

On the other hand, the literature suggests that secondary school students who are not fully informed of the university's financial system can be initially put off by the high sticker price. In their research with 14/15-year-old high achievers from low-participation schools in the UK, Jones (2014) found that almost all of their participants misunderstood the finance system, thinking: that they would need to pay the money back immediately, that the debt would be passed on to their parents if they could not repay, and that they had no understanding of why the fees had recently increased to £9000. Such misunderstandings of the associated debt meant that they considered it too risky. Once informed, two-thirds became tolerant of the price but still felt uncomfortable with the stakes involved if they were not guaranteed a good job. The remainder either felt this was part of their trajectory (less than 5%), or they continued to reject education as necessary for their progression. This suggests that gaining cultural capital relevant to higher education is important, especially for those who may not have been connected to the idea of university through their family environment. This account, however, only supports students' intentions and anticipated behaviour patterns rather than reflecting actual behaviours. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that attitudes towards debt affect actual decisions around university.

Other considerations of costs that go beyond financial concerns are the perceived costs related to lifestyle and identity that come with investment in education. Such costs are often interpreted as a betrayal of identity whereby continuation to university would not usually be considered part of first-generation students' imagined future (O'Shea, 2019). Pursuing social mobility through educational achievement can often be imbued with social and psychological costs, and Friedman (2013) argues that in a society with durable class-based divisions, it is likely to disrupt the pattern of one's social life and involves detachment from and attachment to certain classed cultures whereby these processes are often only in part and therefore

leave individuals with uncertainty, tied to two different social cultures. Jones (2014) further supports this finding that his mainly working-class sample talked about the university as a threat to their identity, tending to reject certain aspects of the perceived university lifestyle.

Research on social mobility in education has offered a gendered view, with males more likely to be concerned that their friends would see them as trying to be better than them (Jones, 2014) and trying to manage their working-class masculinities while achieving academically (Ingram, 2011; Reay, 2002). Friedman (2013) argues “how such young men must produce an enormous amount of emotional, intellectual and interactive work to combat the misalignment between dispositions forged in the family and dispositions needed for educational success” (p. 359). Furthermore, in their research on female Canadian first-generation distance-learning students, Priebe et al. (2008) discuss how parents’ attitudes towards university were imbued with notions of ‘going above your station’ and that work and family responsibilities should come before education, meaning these students were led towards a distance-learning degree where they could maintain said responsibilities more easily. Similarly, research in Australia noted how mature female students often had been expected to leave school, get married, and have children. It was only later in life that they decided to reject these familial expectations and rewrite their educational narrative (O’Shea, 2019). This highlights the potential costs first-generation students face, which are even more entrenched through their working-class and gendered identities. It is not only the costs associated with their identity, but they are conscious of the prospect of the social costs that failure might bring, embedded in assumptions about personal capacities (O’Shea, 2019), feeling self-conscious of their academic ability and the cultural/social impact this would have within the family (Jones, 2014).

Section Summary

In this section, I have highlighted how access to capital can impact first-generation decision-making around university. Whilst lower levels of economic capital in the family can still lead to debt aversion and less opportunity for family engagement with education, many financial barriers have been reduced due to the system of loans, etc., that has accompanied the massification and normalisation of higher education. On the other hand, the differences in the types of cultural and social capital possessed by different groups remain evident. Those without higher education experience in the family are less likely to see university as a natural progression, be fully informed on potential subject or institution options, and face discord between their upbringing and potential transition into higher education. However, there is a renewed focus on the positive impact that the family can have on encouraging social mobility aspirations, regardless of their parent’s educational attainment. This is crucial in shifting the

discourse from a capital deficit to understanding the crucial influence the family can have on their child's progression into higher education. The journey does not end there for these students, and there are some important implications once they arrive at university, which will be explored in the following section.

3.3. Participation and the Undergraduate Experience

The research literature that explores the undergraduate experience is vast. Examining the factors that influence participation, particularly for first-generation students and other under-represented groups (i.e., 'working-class' and 'non-traditional'), has been widespread in the social sciences for decades. Therefore, this section will explore the aspects of the undergraduate university experience which appear in the literature to have the most impact on successful participation for first-generation students. These themes in the literature concern the daily struggles that come with low levels of economic capital, the opportunity structures that depend on the valued types of cultural capital, the sense of inclusion/exclusion arising from social capital networks, and the incongruence between old and new fields.

3.3.1. The Impact of Financial Struggles

A common theme in the literature suggests that students do not receive adequate money from the Student Loans Company to cover all living costs, regardless of socioeconomic background. Seemingly, students must rely on other forms of economic capital to meet their basic needs, from parental financial support, savings, private credit arrangements, and term-time working. Many students must seek alternative financial help whilst studying; how this is sought is unevenly distributed amongst those from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Not all students are equally affected by the impact of being in debt or undertaking term-time work to support their basic needs. It has been suggested that those from lower income backgrounds are most likely to have initial financial difficulties, often commencing university with the most frequent debt levels and using credit cards and overdrafts (Harding, 2011; Hordósy & Clark, 2018c). Furthermore, students' attempts to minimise their debt or reduce monetary outgoings (e.g., living with parents or adopting a more frugal lifestyle) can result in unanticipated outcomes that are concerning for their sense of belonging, participation, and academic progression. This sub-section highlights the potential negative impact of financial struggles on students' overall university experience.

The level of financial support available from parents is undoubtedly related to the level of expendable income that parents have access to from the level of pay they receive for their

employment, accumulated wealth, and housing market wealth. However, the distribution of this support is far from equal. Lewis and West (2017) found that levels of parental support differed dramatically from covering all associated costs to making no contributions at all. It has been further found that those investing the largest amounts of money in their children's education did so due to feeling obliged to help minimise their debt (Harrison et al., 2015), whilst those offering smaller contributions felt anxious over the impact on their retirement fund or their ability to fund younger children in the same way in the future (Lewis & West, 2017). For those students from the highest income backgrounds who receive the greatest amount of financial support from parents, they were also confident that their parents would support them with additional finances if needed to either bridge a deficit or for extra-curricular activities, something which low-income students could not rely on (Hordósy & Clark, 2018c). With funding often only covering tuition fees and accommodation costs, there is often missing discussion about students from intermediate-income groups, whereby they receive insufficient financial support from their families and the funding system (Antonucci, 2018). This deficit in family funding is due to the mismatch in assumptions between the funding system and what families can afford to contribute (BIS, 2013). Furthermore, it supports the notion of the 'missing middle' discussed in a previous section in that this group falls somewhere between the most and least advantaged (Roberts, 2011).

To increase levels of economic capital, many students engage in term-time work whilst studying for full-time undergraduate degrees. Students' motivations for this vary: the need to fund their basic costs, a desire to enrich their social life, or as a way to gain independence from their parents (Roberts & Li, 2017). The type of work engaged in can be defined as 'precarious', characterised by low wages, unknown certainty of work, poor regulatory protection, and poor employee control over working conditions and wages (Vosko, 2010). Thus, students are most likely to work casual jobs and on zero-hours contracts (BIS, 2013; ONS, 2016a), and this brings uncertainty for those who rely on their employment to support themselves financially whilst at university. Term-time working has been found to affect many aspects of university life, such as quality of assignments, attendance at lectures/seminars, greater difficulty accessing university resources, missing deadlines, lower engagement with independent study, poorer coursework and exam grades, and wellbeing (Brennan et al., 2005; Munro, 2011; Roberts & Li, 2017). It is argued that students from many income backgrounds engage in precarious work; however, some might experience different levels of disadvantage depending on their social class (MacDonald, 2016).

In their study on first-generation medical students, Bassett et al. (2019) found that most participants engaged in part-time work on evenings and weekends, resulting in significant

psycho-social strain when balancing work with study. Some adverse outcomes were identified as fatigue and disrupted sleep, resulting in a 'hangover effect', which was detrimental to their studying responsibilities the following day (Kaehne et al., 2014). A small cluster of research has focused specifically on non-traditional and first-generation students' participation in 'elite' degrees, following studies highlighting how the medical professions were still dominated by those from the most privileged familial backgrounds (Laurison & Friedman, 2016). Whilst these studies focus primarily on medical degrees, they do suggest that the detrimental impact of working alongside a degree is significant for these students who are not traditionally part of this 'elite' profession with considerable worries about expenses associated with their programme (Brosnan et al., 2016).

The number of hours worked in term-time employment has been found to make a difference, with longer hours having the largest impact on aspects of the university experience. There seems to be a consensus in the literature that working over 14-15 hours per week significantly affects academic performance (Brennan et al., 2005; Harding, 2011; Hunt et al., 2004). Harding (2011) found that low-income students (characterised by being first-generation, previously receiving free school meals and the Education Maintenance Allowance) were more likely to have a term-time job, were more likely to work over 15 hours a week, and that those with debt and no savings on arrival to university were less likely to pass all their modules in the first year. This suggests that those financially less stable may be unequally impacted by working in term-time. Whilst many low-income students state that working in precarious jobs is necessary for supporting living costs, those from higher-income backgrounds have the luxury of engaging in work only if they deem independence from parents and acquisition of non-essential luxuries as important factors (Antonucci, 2018; Brennan et al., 2005).

Spending and lifestyle at university can be portrayed in the media as a binary of hedonistic partying with no studying and impoverished students trying to make ends meet (Waller, 2006). Harrison et al. (2015) challenge this view by identifying six typologies of student attitudes towards debt and the consequent spending habits at university, which more accurately capture the actual lived experiences of the students. Whilst these types (debt-positive, debt-savvy, debt-resigned, debt-oblivious, debt-anxious, debt-angry) on the surface appear almost deterministic in that each student must fit into one category over another, the authors do point out that these positions are not fixed and that students often move between them over time. The authors suggest that those from working-class backgrounds were more likely to fit the debt-positive typology whereby they saw economic strife as a rational investment to move beyond their parent's financial situation, and those from more middle-

class backgrounds as debt-resigned whereby it was a necessary evil to obtain higher education qualification, with those from the most privileged backgrounds fitting the debt-oblivious typology whereby they either did not consider debt part of their lives or saw it as a problem for their parents (Harrison et al., 2015). The consequences of such different attitudes towards and experiences of debt likely result in differences in everyday spending. Consequently, students may recognise the differences between them and their more or less affluent peers, which may impact an individual's ability to 'fit' in that environment.

3.3.2. *Understanding the 'Rules of the Game'*

One of the prevalent trends in the literature refers to how some students are much more *au fait* with the 'rules of the game' than others (which, of course, is one aspect of cultural capital). The expansion of higher education has meant that the buying power of a degree has somewhat diminished as more and more people graduate with degrees. On the one hand, many students understand the need to engage in extra-curricular activities to increase their chances of employment (Budd, 2016) and give them a positional edge (O'Connor & Bodicoat, 2017). On the other hand, many are still playing by the 'old' rules of the game, whereby increasing educational capital through obtaining a degree alone is seen as a gateway to better employment and life chances (Burke et al., 2019). This challenges the notion of a meritocratic system whereby anyone with the ability and motivation to succeed ultimately will do - it is not only being capable of attaining academic success that is of importance but the systemic way that some can get ahead in the game through knowledge of the necessity to engage in activities beyond those related to their degree.

Extra-curricular activities are those activities that students engage in that go beyond the requirements of their course (Hordósy & Clark, 2018a). Some more specific definitions refer to extra credentials and career-related development, such as volunteering opportunities, internships, and studying abroad (Lehmann, 2012), whereas others offer much broader characterisations. Such broader definitions refer to anything beyond the classroom, such as engagement in university societies, employment, and family and religious commitments (Stuart et al., 2011). Further, anything that contributes to an individual's 'personal capital' should be considered as an additional activity rather than part of their studies (Greenbank, 2015) and can be regarded as 'soft currencies' rather than the 'hard currencies' (Brown et al., 2004, p. 35) stated above. However, Purcell et al. (2013) argue that the push towards extra-curricular activities can reinforce inequalities and that those from less privileged backgrounds and first-generation students tend to engage with them less. This is problematic when the provision of extra-curricular activities is "based on an image of the student as full-time, funded, without caring responsibilities, and discursively positioned as

white, able-bodied, normatively male and single” (Clegg et al., 2010, p. 616), which does not accurately reflect the first-generation population.

The notion that some students are aware of the value of extra-curricular activities, whereas some are less so, has been described by Burke et al. (2019) as ‘knowing’ students and ‘naïve’ students, respectively. Whilst the authors note that the term ‘naïve’ is meant simply as a label rather than a derogatory adjective to describe the individuals, it does unintentionally maintain the position of placing some students in a deficit model.

Nevertheless, whilst the differences were nuanced, they did find that first-generation students (mainly concentrated in a post-1992 institution) were most likely to fit the ‘naïve’ student category and continuing-generation students (concentrated primarily in a Russell Group university) more likely to fit the ‘knowing’ student category. Whilst differences could have resulted from different pedagogical and support structures in the institutions, it is suggested that student’s understanding of the importance of engaging in extra-curricular activities is strongly influenced by parental advice and earlier acquisition of capital in childhood (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Burke et al., 2019). It could be that parents who have obtained educational success know how the system works and can help their children work it; however, those without cannot approach it in the same way (Devine, 2004).

That is not to say that all first-generation students lack the understanding mentioned above but that those without higher education experience in the family are more likely to prioritise their studies over engaging in extra-curricular activities (Bathmaker et al., 2013). Bourdieu (1977) argues that when the field changes (as with the expansion of higher education), the habitus must also change in line with the game’s new rules. However, given the tacit nature of the rules, those with the least experience in the field are most likely to experience difficulties adapting. For those who successfully navigate the rules, divisions of inequality can continue through the way some activities, such as internships and other unpaid work experiences, are geared towards those rich in economic capital as well as the appropriate social and cultural capital needed to gain access to such experiences. Bathmaker et al. (2013) suggest that those from working-class backgrounds are unlikely to have financial support from their parents to engage in unpaid work. Further, their parents are unlikely to be part of professional networks that will be intrinsically useful for capital development or career progression (Lehmann, 2012), instead, students may have to prioritise low-skill and low-paid work to support themselves financially (Antonucci, 2018; Hordósy & Clark, 2018c), as discussed in the previous section.

Whilst many students continued to struggle to gain access to volunteering opportunities abroad and internships in medicine, dentistry, and law, Lehmann (2012) notes in his

longitudinal study in Canada that many had become involved on campus with clubs and societies during their four years, often as well as engaging in paid employment. This suggests a transformation of habitus over the four years, adapting to the academic and cultural demands. Lehmann (2014) further discussed how those who successfully engaged in extra-curricular activities felt significantly more open-minded to diversity and could make bridges with those from cultural, social, and religious backgrounds different from their own. Working-class students often engage in several unstructured activities outside of their academic studies, such as playing computer games, clubbing, cultivating friendships, and online networking (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Stuart et al., 2011) which can be argued to be ways of generating capital, though not necessarily the types of capital that institutions or graduate employers value.

What this means is that those students who have an understanding of how to play the game (of university success) have often come from backgrounds where university is merely an extension of their earlier lives, drawing on capital inherited from their families and embracing a strategic plan for improving future career prospects (Bathmaker et al., 2013). For first-generation students, the university is often an almost life-changing environment whereby their ability to engage in the 'student experience' fully can be hindered by financial and time constraints, access to professional social networks, feeling excluded, and continuing to play by the old rules of the game where academic achievement is considered enough in the graduate labour market. It is not to say that first-generation students are naïve to this. Many strive to overcome this through a strong work ethic, motivation for transformative change, and the moral and real-world values that arise from hardship and previous challenging experiences (Lehmann, 2012; Luzeckyj et al., 2017; Macaulay et al., 2023). As well as drawing on resilience as a resource, Macaulay et al. (2023) argue that their first-generation participants increased their 'know-how' through connections with staff members and peers. This suggests that to achieve success in the field, those without parental experience in higher education may need to acquire the necessary 'know-how', or capital, from others.

3.3.3. Finding a Sense of Inclusion

The requirements for engaging in term-time work discussed in the previous sections have been found to negatively impact social integration, belonging, academic fit and progression in their course due to reduced time and energy for engaging with their university lives (Broadbridge & Swanson, 2005; Mercer et al., 2016). The initial transition period into university is key for students in negotiating their new environment. Wilcox et al. (2005) argue that "in this transitional phase, students have an urgent need to belong, to identify with others, to find a safe place and to negotiate their new identities as university students" (p.

713), with social integration playing a vital role in this process. Forming early compatible friendships is important here, and peers can perceive failure to make social connections as emerging from individual failings (Read et al., 2020). This positions those who do not subscribe to the 'typical student lifestyle' as somehow different and failing to integrate into the university environment. This suggests that failure to assimilate one's habitus to that of the institution's habitus creates a divisive barrier between them and their more involved peers.

Differences in living arrangements whilst at university have been found to differ across the student body. As discussed earlier in this chapter, non-traditional students are more likely to remain in the family home and commute daily to their institution (Christie, 2007; Holton & Finn, 2018); others will attend universities less geographically proximate and reside in halls of residence. Those living in university accommodation are offered crucial social support through their immediate environment, representing a shift from relying on family, whilst those living away from university accommodation can struggle to form friendships similarly (Thomas, 2002; Wilcox et al., 2005). In the USA, Soria and Roberts (2021) reported that their first-year, campus-based, first-generation participants from low-income backgrounds were significantly more likely to have a higher sense of belonging and resilience and perceive that the campus was a welcoming environment than their counterparts who lived off campus. Whilst this research does indicate challenges for those who live off campus, this quantitative analysis of large survey data does little to explain how and why this phenomenon is experienced. This suggests that non-traditional students' 'immobility' in attending local universities negatively impacts their sense of inclusion. However, Finn (2017b) argues that the day-to-day mobilities of those who commute can be "forcefully enriching" (p. 755), offering a broader value for student's emotional well-being and that discussions of local/non-local (mobility/immobility) should go beyond this binary to consider more carefully the personal relationships which give "emotional context to mobility practices" (p. 756).

Understanding how more privileged students find belonging with those like themselves, it is noted that this is sometimes done by distancing themselves from those who are different. Crozier et al. (2016) found that peer relations in university were often classed, raced, and gendered by which white middle-class males used their gaze and judgements to differentiate themselves from others through mocking and mimicking, perceiving others as alien through differences in taste, and constructing them as potentially threatening to the university environment. Such stories have been reported in the press. Self-described working-class students from a Russell Group university in the north of England have recently spoken out in

the media about the “toxic attitude” they faced at university, where they faced “discrimination and ridiculing” because of their local, regional accents and the necessity to work to support their studies financially (as per an article in *The Guardian* - Parveen, 2020). It was further reported that this form of bullying also led to stigmatisation and sexual predation, whereby having relations with northern working-class people became a game for some sports teams or societies. By distancing themselves in this way, some students construct their own cultural and social backgrounds as superior, resulting in the marginalisation and exclusion of those from different backgrounds.

This type of divisive behaviour can lead some to feel illegitimate in the new environment, often characterised by differences in language, accent, lifestyle, and dress compared to their peers from more privileged backgrounds. In her research with first-generation students who were daughters of single mothers, Gagnon (2018) notes that feelings of being judged for their accent and social background, as well as perceptions that others were favoured in the classroom because they seemed more intelligent, led to behaviours of keeping quiet, feeling insecure about their background, and became how they felt illegitimate in academia. Bradley (2017) further found that this struggle to relate to their middle-class peers due to differences in language and accent often formed part of the reason for some working-class students dropping out of university. Interestingly, lack of fit was also noted in some middle-class students attending more heterogeneous universities. However, this often waned as they moved into the second year and found people with similar backgrounds (Bradley, 2017). This could suggest that feelings of legitimacy are influenced by how well social connections are made (Bassett et al., 2019) and how closely one’s habitus fits with the habitus of the institution (Reay et al., 2010).

A sense of ‘fit’ with the academic expectations of the university has been found to vary with continuing students more strongly than first-generation students identifying themselves as academic when they first commence university (Janke et al., 2017). Furthermore, first-generation students from state schools (along with others targeted by the widening participation agenda) are less confident in approaching academic staff for help, find the pedagogy transition harder to navigate, fear their ignorance of the ‘lingo’ would be unveiled, yet on the other hand, were the most likely to be satisfied with the way they were assessed, appreciating the opportunity to be assessed on more than just memory (Jones, 2017). Whilst this research by Jones (2017) highlights some barriers in the learning environment, it does exclude mature, part-time, and distance-learning students (of which first-generation students are often found in high proportions). It may miss some crucial nuances experienced by these groups. It has been identified that belonging is associated with academic fit. Christie et al.

(2014) discussed how prioritising studies, engaging in the learning community, and taking responsibility for their learning were key aspects of identifying as a student in the university environment for their participants. This often meant juggling commitments and competing demands, especially for mature students. However, many found strategies to cope over time.

Those who do not traditionally have success in education within their family and life trajectories can find fitting into the higher education environment challenging. This is often understood through the lens of social class. Higher education has traditionally been reserved for the middle classes, fostering middle-class values and appreciating skills and traits (and types of capital) typically associated with being middle-class. This poses a challenging environment for those without these valued assets. This can be understood through Bourdieu's notion of habitus; internalised expectations and values of individuals and social groups that influence experiences and behaviours mean that those who have already internalised the necessary understandings of the university will likely feel more comfortable within the environment (Bourdieu, 1977). Those without such understanding feel that the university is not for people like them and that they do not belong. This is not to say that one's habitus cannot evolve, adapting to the new environment and allowing individuals to find their place in the field. However, this can often be challenging and comes at a cost for the individual's connection to home and feelings of disjunction. Furthermore, focusing on one's habitus in isolation places them as deficient. It conceals the structural problems inherent in society, which means the individual's habitus does not align with the institutional habitus.

3.3.4. Managing Home and University Life

For first-generation students where higher education is not part of the educational biography of their family, their move into higher education has repercussions for both the learners and those around them (O'Shea, 2019). O'Shea (2019) describes this move as boundary crossing into a new field whereby maintaining relationships across both domains can require emotional agility, with some managing to move across the border. In contrast, some continue to exist partially in each domain. When the new habitus of the university is more aligned with middle-class values and their habitus sits within the working-class habitus of the family, some students can find a disjuncture between the two, finding it difficult to maintain both worlds successfully. Lehmann (2014) argues that those who have successfully transformed their habitus found this process uncomplicated and often adapted forms of conversation depending on their audience, as they were aware of the differences between their new lives and those of friends and family away from the university. Further, they did not make normative claims about the value of these but showed a sense of relief that their lives

were following a different path. For those who feel they fit into the university environment, it is suggested that they feel comfortable with their decisions as they become socially mobile, something their parents had hoped for.

The sense of belonging discussed in the previous section is affected by this disjuncture between worlds, not wanting to stick out in the university setting and not wanting to appear superior in their home setting (Azmitia et al., 2018). Furthermore, in research focusing on first-generation medical students, their families did not know the professional occupation, yet they did not fit in with their new medical peers, leading to a sense of not fitting into either world (Bassett et al., 2019; Mann, 2016). This causes conflict within themselves and may weaken relationships with their friends and family as they become socially mobile (Lee & Kramer, 2013). Byrom and Lightfoot (2013) discuss how academic failure further deepened their sense of 'classlessness', putting their career aspirations into question. Whilst this position threatened their habitus transition, it often resulted in wanting to complete their studies, both out of principle and in an effort not to disappoint anyone. It could be suggested that such resilience is born out of the "fuzzification" (Eyal, 2012, p. 179) of boundary work whereby this in-between space has the potential for learning and for new resources to be acquired by drawing on their life experiences to negotiate the spaces between the boundaries, what O'Shea (2016) calls experiential capital.

This type of disjuncture (e.g. between home and university life) described by Bourdieu (2004) as a 'cleft habitus' (and later by Ingram (2011) as a 'habitus tug') with its conflicting dispositions can cause insecurity and tension, particularly where upward social mobility of an individual occurs (Friedman, 2016). Although some have found that students find it painful to balance their new levels of cultural capital with their old lives (Lee & Kramer, 2013) or that they have abandoned peer, family, and partner relationships (Waller et al., 2011) to pursue education, Abrahams and Ingram (2013) argue for another possibility; that of "the chameleon habitus" (p. 10). In their paper (published from data gathered in the earlier mentioned 'Paired Peers' project), Abrahams and Ingram (2013) note how their locally based working-class (and likely first-generation given the parameters on which they assigned social class) participants were able to easily switch between these two fields by modifying their behaviour, speech, and appearance to benefit them in the field they were operating in. As a result, they remained connected to both worlds, reconciling the differences between the old and new habitus and finding a 'third space' in which they belong in "neither and both places at once" (Ingram & Abrahams, 2016, p. 152). However, others have argued that those who experience upward social mobility can find it painful and "a distinctly bumpy and non-linear ride" where they continue to face feelings of "inferiority" in the new space (Friedman, 2016,

p. 144). This suggests that reconciling the old and new habitus may become more challenging as they become more upwardly socially mobile (i.e., in postgraduate study and the labour market).

Devlin (2013) argues that the lack of overlap between non-traditional students' norms and values and those of the institution is a 'sociocultural incongruity', suggesting a bridge metaphor as a joint venture between individuals, institutions, and government to conceptualise what is needed to overcome this. However, this continues to place first-generation students within a deficit model and suggests an endpoint in their transition. Instead of this, Kahu and Nelson (2017) argue to understand this space as an 'educational interface' which moves the focus away from any lack of alignment between cultures and highlights the importance of not sacrificing any current ways of being, rather, negotiating the gap in between within a dynamic and fluctuating set of relationships. It is argued that this would better further our understanding of how the interaction of individual and institutional characteristics influences success. In support of this, Loveday (2015) found that their working-class participants were not striving to leave behind their working-class roots to become middle-class, instead seeing their aspiration for educational success as a form of 'fugitivity' from inequality rather than an escape from their working-class backgrounds.

As such, it may not be useful to see home relationships and a successful move into the higher education field as being counterposed to each other. Some studies have found that family relationships were a source of motivation for persisting in the higher education environment, with both participants drawing on the same resource that O'Shea (2015) badges as family capital. First-generation students can both draw on their families for support and as motivation to persist (Lehmann, 2014; O'Shea, 2015) and become educators in their family homes. Wainwright and Watts (2019) discuss how these students can have a 'slipstream effect' back upon the family unit, acting as role models for younger siblings and even parents, who still feel restrained by social class place and academic confidence. They describe this in distinct and diffuse terms, actively impacting siblings' post-compulsory decisions and hopeful that their role modelling will be embraced, respectively (Davies, 2019; Wainwright & Watts, 2019).

Section Summary

To this extent, many first-generation students see their background as motivation to pursue and be successful in the middle-class domain of university. Whilst there are barriers based around economic restraints, misunderstandings of the cultural values and norms of university, different access to social capital to capitalise on opportunities fully, and a habitus

potentially mismatched to that of the university, many can still navigate the environment and succeed within it. It is argued that a key part of this is the fluidity in becoming adept in the new rules of the game, building a repertoire of relevant capital which allows them to engage with the field as a transformative experience. Managing old and new fields can come with psychological costs, but those who can reflect on their position and understand both fields may find a better balance. However, those who would be considered successful in this respect still exist in the comfort and protection of the university environment, and it is still being determined to what extent their new social and cultural capital acquisitions will continue to hold value. Despite many first-generation students navigating this minefield successfully, the structural inequalities continue beyond obtaining an undergraduate degree. Therefore, the next section will consider the transition into postgraduate study and the professional occupations some students aspire to.

3.4. Academic and Wider Success Beyond Undergraduate Study

Structural inequalities do not necessarily reduce purely based on obtaining an undergraduate degree, with many continuing to face disadvantages when entering the graduate labour market or postgraduate study. The massification of higher education has meant that having an undergraduate degree does not necessarily mean you have a positional edge anymore, with credential inflation meaning that a postgraduate degree is often needed to enter some graduate and professional occupations. This section captures the factors that make academic and wider success challenging for first-generation students, as well as others captured under the umbrella term of 'non-traditional'. Firstly, I will consider how the goalposts have moved and that some of the challenges faced by non-traditional undergraduate students have now moved up to postgraduate study. Furthermore, those disadvantages continue into the labour market, with those from less privileged backgrounds being less likely to secure higher incomes in elite professions. Secondly, I will explore the postgraduate researcher experience and the broader landscape of academia with its neoliberal influences. I will consider the challenges of not knowing the 'rules of the game' and the factors that are most likely to impact first-generation students' success in the doctoral field. Although the remainder of this thesis does not consider the postgraduate research experience *per se*, it seems prudent to include a discussion of this literature so that the findings can be understood within the broader context of the higher education landscape.

3.4.1. Transitioning to Postgraduate Study and the Labour Market

Beyond undergraduate study, it has been suggested that those from lower-income backgrounds remain disadvantaged in their post-graduation career management activities (McCafferty, 2022). Hordósy and Clark (2018b) found that this was experienced through

three mechanisms: firstly, they were unable to rely on parental financial support, and therefore, there was an urgency to enter paid employment; secondly, this urgency meant they were unable to move to big cities where opportunities were more abundant and instead returned to their home town and thirdly, that they had fewer social networks to draw on to help them with job searching and application processes. Such differences between them and those from higher income backgrounds were evident in research by Lewis and West (2017), who point to the ability of some parents to be able to help with job searching and financially support their children whilst they search for a graduate opportunity; this was done both through not requesting rent for living in the family home and by continuing to offer financial contributions as they did through undergraduate study. It is argued that these factors, which may inhibit one's ability to utilise their undergraduate experience fully, are more important than socioeconomic status *per se* (Purcell et al., 2013); however, they are intrinsically linked.

Experiences in the graduate labour market differ for those from lower and higher-income backgrounds, with some groups being more susceptible to unemployment after graduation (Behle, 2016). Indeed, Henderson (2019) found evidence to suggest that first-generation students are less likely to complete their undergraduate studies at all. Having a postgraduate degree increases the chances of obtaining a professional occupation two-fold for all groups - still, inequalities stretch beyond undergraduate study, and for the youngest age, only those from the most privileged backgrounds already obtain an 'edge' from this (Wakeling & Laurison, 2017). This has a marked effect on social mobility for those earlier discussed who believe that a higher education qualification is enough on its own to secure a shift of their position in social space. Laurison and Friedman (2016) argue that markers that rely on access to elite professions as a measure of social mobility ignore the differing levels of resources that individuals bring into occupations and that social origin continues to have an impact well into the life course, especially in elite occupations. Even when individuals can achieve some level of social mobility through access to elite professions, many face challenges which stem from their different cultural, social, and economic resources (Lareau, 2015). Laurison and Friedman (2016) go further to show that many hit the "class ceiling" (p. 669), which prevents upwardly mobile people from receiving the same earnings as those from more privileged backgrounds.

UK postgraduate degree holders have been found to earn more than those who only hold an undergraduate degree. In 2013/14, the Department for Education indicated that the average earnings for those with a taught master's degree earned around £10,000 more per year than those who held just an undergraduate degree (DfE, 2018). Furthermore, postgraduate degree holders were more likely to belong to the 'elite' classifications with the highest economic, cultural, and social capital (Wakeling & Savage, 2015). However, others have

found that the future earnings from having a postgraduate degree are varied, with Britton et al. (2020) arguing that having a postgraduate degree prevented them from having low earnings (rather than guaranteeing high earnings); however, this likely depends on what degree has been obtained and from where. While the future earning potential that comes with higher-level qualifications is varied, it does not seem to align with the meritocratic discourse prevalent in governmental rhetoric. Instead, it appears that the level of graduate underemployment increases as the number of graduates increases (Burke, 2016; Purcell et al., 2013).

To improve employment prospects and to progress in careers have been the most common factors cited for progression to postgraduate study (Keane, 2017; McCulloch & Thomas, 2013). Morgan (2014) points to factors relating to socioeconomic and generational status (such as being first-generation) as having an impact on the ability to fund postgraduate study, with others noting that progression to all levels of postgraduate study is heavily skewed in favour of those from higher income backgrounds (HEPI, 2010) and that higher levels of undergraduate debt negatively affect the transition into postgraduate study (Purcell et al., 2013). Posselt and Grodsky (2017) found that in the US, there was an overrepresentation of students studying for master's or doctoral degrees whose parents also had obtained those qualifications and Renbarger et al. (2023) report that 12% of first-generation students went on to study at the doctoral level, compared to 22% of continuing-generation students. Similarly, research in Norway found that students are more likely to progress to doctoral degrees if their parents also have a PhD (Mastekaasa, 2006). This suggests that parental education level continues to impact progression to the highest degrees.

With the introduction of postgraduate loans, recent research in this field has been dominated by Paul Wakeling, who has taken a keen interest in the effects this funding has had on social mobility (Mateos-González & Wakeling, 2020; Wakeling et al., 2017; Wakeling & Laurison, 2017). Wakeling et al. (2017) found that those who have graduate parents were more likely to transition to postgraduate study and that those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were underrepresented in those universities with the highest rates of progression to postgraduate study; however, that undergraduate debt *per se* was not an impediment to their progression, but it was more a lack of credit to do so (Mateos-González & Wakeling, 2020).

In their research exploring the effects of master's loans on the transition to postgraduate study, Mateos-González and Wakeling (2020) found that the gap in participation between different socioeconomic groups had narrowed considerably; however, their focus on a UK-domiciled, first-degree, immediate transition to a taught master's degree sample, naturally

misses a large proportion of those who embark on postgraduate study (such as mature-age students). Others note that first-generation doctoral students were more likely to study at less prestigious universities (Bahack & Addi-Racah, 2022), and Wakeling and Mateos-González (2021) further found that those who graduated from the 'Golden Triangle' or Russell Group universities were more likely to go on to postgraduate study, and those from managerial backgrounds or with at least one parent with a higher education qualification were more likely to study postgraduate at a Golden Triangle or Russell Group university than their counterparts.

The widening participation agenda has paid little attention to access to and success in postgraduate study compared to undergraduate study. This perhaps reflects a new way of maintaining 'privilege' in the social world. Traditional conceptions of postgraduate students suggest a biography of those who move through compulsory schooling, progressing into undergraduate study and then on to postgraduate. However, it is argued that this view no longer reflects the group accurately (O'Donnell et al., 2009). Keane (2017) identified significant differences in access students based on their participant's age, whereby those who followed the above 'traditional' route into higher education were more likely to see progression to postgraduate study as an obvious decision in line with their career plans, compared to their more mature aged peers who had returned to education and were often unsure of their post-graduate plans, considering broader factors (financial and family implications for example) in their decision-making. Furthermore, several 'risk factors' for postgraduate student attrition are much more relevant for first-generation students, such as part-time enrolment, full-time employment, financial independence, and the number of dependent children (Seay et al., 2008). McCulloch and Thomas (2013) argue that if those from under-represented backgrounds are given access to postgraduate study, they should have the same likelihood of succeeding as their privileged peers. This calls for a broader focus on the experience of postgraduate degrees and doctoral research.

Holley and Gardner (2012) note that choosing which institution to apply for doctoral studies was influenced by being unclear of the educational trajectories available to them, not understanding the prestige of some institutions over others, family obligations, and financial limitations, which often stemmed from the levels of valued capital associated with their socioeconomic background. These factors echo the literature earlier presented on the transition to undergraduate study. In her research on first-generation postgraduate taught students, Marvell (2022) noted how students "navigate a range of parallel coercions like cost, location, programme specialisms, bursaries, and institutional 'reputation'" (p. 2399) when applying for a master's degree. Of note is how their institution decisions were closely tied up with a reliance on receiving funding (through scholarship or master's loan), with

social class belonging, hometown familiarity, and familial responsibilities and commitment. This suggests that first-generation students continue to face challenges based on the resources and behaviours that would enable a successful encounter with these structures. Marvell (2022) concludes that the unregulated postgraduate fees have “priced out” many less affluent students. Therefore, the new postgraduate loans do not even remove the economic barriers, never mind any other social or cultural aspects involved.

3.4.2. The Postgraduate Researcher Experience

There is a wealth of evidence surrounding the general experience of postgraduate research students; however, there is a noticeable gap in the literature exploring first-generation postgraduate students, especially in the UK. As a result, this sub-section will focus on the experience of first-generation postgraduate research students (mainly at the doctoral level), but I will draw on the more general literature for the context where appropriate.

In their comprehensive review of the general doctoral experience, Sverdlik et al. (2018) summarise that there are several external and internal factors which impact the experience of doctoral students. These external factors include “supervision, their personal and social lives, departmental support and socialisation, as well as financial opportunities”, whereas the internal factors relate to “motivational variables, writing competencies, and academic identity” (Sverdlik et al., 2018, p. 378). Further, it has been noted that there are several pockets of the postgraduate researcher experience literature which specifically explore the experience of women in doctoral programmes, international students, students of colour, part-time and distance learning students (Osterauer, 2022); however, addressing these in any depth would go beyond the scope of this thesis and the space available. I suggest then that what is most important is understanding how these internal and external factors differ depending on background. It is key that they are understood in the context of their highly diverse nature. Failing to do this may run the risk that students who succeed in postgraduate study are only those who already feel competent and confident, which is predominantly in contrast with the principles of the widening participation agenda (O'Donnell et al., 2009).

In examining the literature on the doctoral experience, it seems prudent to understand this within the current context of academia. The landscape of higher education is said to be “marked by neoliberalism and its concomitant high levels of individualism, competition and precariousness” (Mitchell, 2019, p. 187). These neoliberal influences have meant that students are increasingly seen as consumers, with an increased focus on metrics (Vican et al., 2020). As a result, there has been a tightening of doctoral completion times and a greater need to develop professional skills beyond the doctoral research to secure future employment (Caretta et al., 2018; Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). Similarly, early career

researchers face an intensification of work and continued pressures to enhance and diversify their skill sets to achieve a stable employment position (Caretta et al., 2018; Mula et al., 2022). In addition, Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic have cast uncertainty over the sector with changes to fees for EU students and an economic downturn, which has meant changes to public spending and increased funding pressures for institutions (Westphal & Ilieva, 2022). This changing landscape is likely to be challenging for all doctoral students; however, it may impact first-generation students disproportionately.

A sense of belonging in the scholarly community contributes to positive experiences, well-being, satisfaction, and persistence and is significant for engagement in doctoral work (Vekkaila et al., 2014). Such belonging and successful completion issues have been linked to how some students experience financial hardship. It has been suggested that those from less privileged backgrounds are more likely to struggle financially, which impacts their sense of belonging, resulting in a lower academic self-concept and career aspiration, with the reverse pattern being true for those from more privileged backgrounds (Ostrove et al., 2011). However, Ostrove et al. (2011) argue that it is specifically the effects of financial hardship rather than socioeconomic background in general that causes such effects. First-generation students are more likely to undertake doctoral studies at less prestigious universities (Bahack & Addi-Racah, 2022; Wakeling & Mateos-González, 2021) where fully-funded scholarships are few, students are more likely to self-fund and carry the financial burden themselves due to a lack of financial support from the family. Gardner (2013) argues that there is a negative correlation between financial support and completion times, meaning that the greater financial support doctoral students have, the less time it takes to complete. Carrying the financial burden and tightened completion times may mean that first-generation students face greater challenges in completing doctoral studies. This suggests that access to economic capital may play a more significant role in successfully participating in and completing doctoral studies than at the undergraduate level.

The 'imposter phenomenon' or 'imposter syndrome' is noted in the postgraduate researcher literature as a significant challenge to belonging and well-being for doctoral students (Lane et al., 2019; Murphy et al., 2023; Tigranyan et al., 2021; Waight & Giordano, 2018) and it is characterised as an "internal experience of intellectual phoniness" (Clance & Imes, 1978, p. 241). This phenomenon is relatively common in the doctoral community, but it seems particularly strong for first-generation students. For example, in their study in Finland, Nori et al. (2020) found that doctoral students with lower parental education levels experienced a sense of inferiority and inadequacy, doubted their skills, and had problems with self-esteem, unlike their counterparts with highly educated parents. Further, imposter syndrome is particularly prevalent in women and students of colour, where they often face multiple

disadvantages of being first-generation students in male-dominated fields or predominantly white institutions (Gardner, 2013; Holley & Gardner, 2012; Patel, 2023; Shavers & Moore, 2019; Wallace, 2022; Wallace & Ford, 2021). Such notions manifest as feelings of being a 'fraud', whereby first-generation students ascribe luck or chance as a reason for their accomplishments and live in fear of being discovered (Gardner, 2013). This suggests that where students do not inherit the valued types of capital associated with higher education accomplishment from their families, doctoral studies can be a challenging environment to navigate.

Feelings of being an imposter can cause uncertainty in the academic environment and can impact doctoral student's confidence in accessing resources and seeking support from faculty staff and supervisory teams (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021; Sverdlik et al., 2018). The literature in the field of doctoral education indicates that effective interpersonal relationships with PhD supervisors and other staff are a crucial influence on the doctoral learning experience (Grant et al., 2014; Osterauer, 2022), acting as both mentors and role models (Li et al., 2023). In the USA, Kim and Sax (2009) note that student-faculty interaction varied, with first-generation students interacting with faculty less frequently and being less satisfied with their interactions than continuing-generation students. This reflects earlier discussed literature on the experience of first-generation undergraduate students who find it difficult to seek help from staff members. Reflecting on their own experiences of doctoral study, Caretta et al. (2018, p. 272) argue that "without sufficient support structures and access to sound mentorship", many doctoral students may struggle to manage and balance the various aspects of their candidature. Ultimately, establishing supportive relationships with supervisors, and other staff, seems crucial for helping doctoral students to navigate the environment. However, these relationships could be hindered by imposter feelings, particularly for first-generation students.

Like the undergraduate field, doctoral education is characterised by a distinct environment with its principles and customs. It has been argued that an implicit assumption of expertise, based on the student's previous success in education, is prevalent in the transition to postgraduate study (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013). Such assumptions are problematic as "students transition from consumers of information to creators of knowledge" (Howard, 2017, p. 517) in their progression to doctoral study, suggesting that the doctoral journey demands more than the previously acquired expertise. In Bourdieusian terms, this implicit assumption of expertise upon entry into doctoral education reflects the accumulation of capital gathered from their previous academic success. Further, the shift from consumers to producers of knowledge may require socialisation into a new habitus in which different skills are valued and cultivated.

Discipline-specific research in the USA discusses the importance of socialising postgraduate students into the field's norms, especially for those without higher education in their family biography. Winkle-Wagner and McCoy (2016), in their research of a Graduate School preparation programme, suggest that this process should help to increase social and cultural capital which are specific to the discipline, for example for those studying an English degree, they talk of learning the vocabulary, learning how authors speak, and connecting them to a network of other aspiring authors. In essence, these students were encouraged to make space in the field for themselves, and such an approach led to them not feeling as though they had to alter significant parts of themselves to fit into the academic field. Furthermore, in their research looking at those studying a biology postgraduate degree, Roksa et al. (2018) found little variance in the outcomes between first-generation and continuing-generation students. They argued this was due to particular socialisation in their discipline field, which allowed them to acquire the necessary skills, knowledge, norms, and habits, which enabled their participation in the community of scholars. Whilst this demonstrates that the acquisition of valued capital impacts successful participation in the field, this cannot be generalised across all disciplines, given that the criterion for progress varies.

Socialisation in the field seems an important aspect of succeeding in that environment, but Gardner and Holley (2011) argue that first-generation students struggle to understand the 'rules' of the game as they are less likely to build strong supportive networks to aid the process; "students often do not even know the questions they should ask, much less to whom they should be asked" (Gardner, 2013, p. 47). Further, the changing landscape of higher education has meant that the academy has become more competitive, necessitating engagement with activities that are beyond the PhD. Whilst not all doctoral researchers aspire to a career in academia, those that do are increasingly expected to develop their skill sets by presenting at conferences, teaching, publishing in highly ranked journals, and social networking (Caretta et al., 2018; Li et al., 2023). Mula et al. (2022) argue that similar pressures continue into early career research as an academic's professional performance is constantly under evaluation. As a result, first-generation students may find it more challenging to succeed in the new environment without appropriate inherited capital from the family or sufficient socialisation into the norms and practices of the academy.

Engaging in doctoral study can be a valuable experience for post-graduation careers. In their research exploring graduate's perceptions of doctoral value, Bryan and Guccione (2018) found that the doctorate provided career, skill, social, and personal value to their post-graduation lives. Nevertheless, the same authors also point to how this value was often described through their engagement with extra-curricular opportunities and experiences. These supplementary experiences not only complemented their studies but also addressed

crucial development gaps. However, those in non-academic careers tended to perceive the doctorate as “worth doing” because of the personal value they gained but not “worth having” due to the low value it had to employers (Guccione & Bryan, 2023, p. 93). This highlights the notion that traditional doctoral degree programmes alone may not sufficiently equip graduates for the challenges of the professional world. This may be especially true for those who are not familiar with the ‘rules of the game’ or aspire to non-academic careers.

As we have seen, there is a strong indication that engagement with extracurricular opportunities is an important influence on post-PhD success, especially in academia. This suggests that merely completing the work associated with the qualification itself may not be enough to secure upward mobility for non-traditional students. Mitchell (2019) notes that belief in education as a meritocratic system was a key influence on her first-generation participants’ decisions to pursue and persist in doctoral study. Their hopes of upward social mobility through which they “gain a good life” constitute a positive student identity; however, this rests on the discourse that university is a place that recognises and rewards academic merit (Mitchell, 2019, p. 189). As noted earlier in this section, those from less privileged backgrounds are likely to earn less than those from more privileged backgrounds despite having a similar postgraduate education (Laurison & Friedman, 2016). This, alongside the competitive neoliberal influences in the academy and increasing graduate underemployment, may make it even more challenging for the meritorious dreams of first-generation students to be realised.

Section Summary

In this section, I have highlighted the persistence of structural inequalities beyond undergraduate education, particularly impacting first-generation students as they navigate postgraduate study and the labour market. The multiplicity of factors that impact first-generation students cannot be reduced to those that might impact a notional ‘typical student’. Furthermore, it should not be assumed that completing an undergraduate degree means that a student possesses specialist knowledge or can transfer the knowledge learned from their undergraduate degree to their postgraduate study (Holley & Gardner, 2012). Having cultural and social capital that enables access to the types of knowledge and networks crucial for making informed decisions seems just as important for progression to postgraduate study as for undergraduate study. The postgraduate study field differs considerably from the undergraduate field, and success in one does not necessarily mean success in the other. However, we can assume that moving into postgraduate study does, in some respects, reflect success in higher education.

With the expansion of higher education, it is becoming necessary for some to obtain a postgraduate degree to get a positional edge. I argue here that the goalposts have moved and that the inequalities faced at the undergraduate level seem just as prominent in postgraduate study. There are similarities regarding decision-making, with first-generation students not necessarily understanding the educational possibilities of further study and being less likely to progress into doctoral study at the most prestigious universities. There are also continued difficulties with belonging, both socially and academically, during postgraduate study as there also were at the undergraduate level. In particular, disparities persist in the postgraduate researcher experience, shaped by neoliberal influences within academia. This evolving landscape demands not only academic prowess but also engagement with extracurricular experiences and professional development, which poses additional challenges for non-traditional students.

Despite the introduction of master's and doctoral loans, however, there remains an economic barrier to accessing postgraduate study. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the debt incurred through undergraduate study seems to have become normalised, and the associated loans, to some extent, have allowed for the expansion of higher education. The loans now available for postgraduate study, in some cases, do not even cover the cost of the tuition fee, meaning that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may be instantly priced out of studying specific courses at certain institutions. Whilst it seems that those who enter postgraduate study earn more and that graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds do better than their non-graduate peers, we also know they suffer a penalty for unequal pay in the labour market. This suggests that the promise of social mobility bound up with university participation may not become a reality for some.

3.5. Rationale and Aims of the Thesis

Through this literature review, I have explored the landscape of first-generation research in higher education. How the literature is presented here reflects the difficulty in separating different inequality measures (such as first-generation, social class, and socioeconomic factors), which presents challenges in constructing a comprehensive literature review and drawing conclusions based purely on first-generation status. What is clear is that inequality persists both within higher education and in the broader societal structure, with stagnant social mobility and continued inequality in later life. Whilst undergraduate degrees have become more accessible and the economic barriers have been reduced somewhat, some unequal access for first-generation students and those identified as disadvantaged through other measures remain. Of note are the social and cultural assets most valued by higher education that appear more readily available to those with a family history of university

attendance. Despite the recent introduction of postgraduate loan funding, this seems to have done little to reduce the economic barriers to study, never mind beginning to address the prevalent social and cultural inequality; even with degree qualifications, there is evidence of continued inequality in the labour market for those from less privileged backgrounds.

There has been substantial research about the barriers less privileged students face vis-a-vis higher education. These barriers seem to be prevalent across all stages of the educational journey; from pre-enrolment in an undergraduate degree through to higher-level doctoral study, the literature indicates that the first-generation experience can be challenging. This has provided the foundation for my research. Nevertheless, as my discussion of this research literature has shown, many questions remain. In particular, relatively little research has focused on the experiences of first-generation postgraduate students in the UK. We know very little about their experiences of educational success and how they overcome adversities and succeed in the higher education environment at the highest levels. The remainder of this thesis will explore these questions by addressing the following aims:

- ❖ To explore how first-generation students navigate the educational environment;
- ❖ To identify the mechanisms that enable first-generation students to participate successfully in higher education; and
- ❖ To contribute to capital theory in the educational field.

4. Chapter Four - Methodology

In the preceding chapter, I outlined the context within which my research was undertaken, highlighting the relevance and importance of understanding educational success for those who are the first in their family to go to university. In the following chapter, I will present my philosophical position as a critical realist and explore how this can be integrated with my Bourdieusian theoretical lens. I will then explain how these positions led to the research design and discuss the reflexive and ethical considerations that arose. I then offer a description of the use of biographical interviews as the method for data collection, with the latter part of this chapter discussing the analysis process, using both thematic analysis and narrative construction to interpret the data.

4.1. Philosophical Position

I use critical realism as the philosophical framework for understanding social scientific research. Critical realism emerged as an alternative to the positivist and constructionist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) and stemmed from Bhaskar (Bhaskar, 1978; 2014) who argued that some observed phenomena could be explained by mechanisms that were unobserved by the people experiencing them. In positioning critical realism within the broader philosophical debate, Fletcher (2017) argues that one of the essential views of critical realism is that human knowledge captures only a small part of a much larger reality. In his view, ontology (what is real) is not reducible to epistemology (our knowledge of the real). That is not to say that subjective understandings of the world are excluded within a critical realist framework but that these form only part of our understanding of a particular phenomenon. This position allows me to embrace all levels of knowledge, and by investigating the observed subjective experiences, it is possible to understand the knowledge of the structures that generate them that may lie beyond that which can be directly observed.

To demonstrate the critical realist position, Nash (2002) uses an analogy of a stone hitting some glass that breaks. The conclusion could be drawn that the glass breaks because the glass is breakable. However, if three stones were to hit the glass and only one broke it, we may need to reconsider the conclusion. A critical realist perspective would argue that the glass's unseen properties cause the reaction between the stone and the glass. Therefore, the combination of the particular properties of the glass and a sharp object hitting the glass will result in the glass breaking or not. To make sound conclusions, it is essential to link the observed practices with the structures and known dispositions of the phenomena in question. In other words, the source of the knowledge of the properties of glass comes from wider understandings which underpin an analysis of the phenomenon of stones and glass

breaking. Such a view shapes the methodology in social science research and this research. I argue that there is a need to bring in the context of societal structures to situate the experience and explain how this leads to tendencies to actions and behaviours.

Within the critical realist paradigm, we must consider the three stratified levels of the social world: the empirical, the actual, and the real (Sayer, 2000). There are several ways to map this onto my research, so I do not intend to argue that this is the only way. Instead, I propose this as one possibility that allows a useful bridge to capital theory that situates experience within context. To understand how first-generation students are successful in education, I suggest beginning with the observed practices, that is, the experiences of education as directly revealed by participants (the empirical). From here, I propose consideration of the encompassing events and happenings that may not be observed at the level of the empirical, that is, the participatory acts in education (the actual) and that the nature of these events depends on if and when the powers of the real are activated. As with the above analogy of the breaking glass, to make sound conclusions within a critical realist paradigm, I must situate events at the level of the empirical and the actual within the context of the real, that is, identifying the interacting processes of interpersonal relationships and social structures which determine the educational experiences and participatory acts. Therefore, first-generation success can be understood by considering aspects of societal structure, dispositions, and the resulting practices to identify the mechanisms that brought about educational success.

While Bourdieu was not explicit that he worked within the ontological and epistemological framework of critical realism, some of his works could be included. Bourdieu's tendency to an approach that insists on deep knowledge about an individual's context, both in the present and the past, suggests that individuals are more than that which they can report in the immediate moment. A Bourdieusian approach argues that individual actions and thoughts are accumulated over time in groups (*habitus*) through the exchange of resources (capital) and relations and that these practices form a framework which affects the individual in the present (Nash, 2002). Such an approach further argues that science must comprise structure and agency, with Steensen (2006) claiming that said structures do not necessarily refer to any fixed set of ideas of material circumstances that determine individual action but that everyone has their own unique set of environmental and historical circumstances that accumulate over time. The extent to which we act from birth has some decision-making quality constrained by the structures that construct our immediate experience. Over time, these become more complex and are inextricably part of our decision-making, meaning they are continuously being produced, reproduced, and modified. From a critical realist

perspective, these structures exist irrespective of our awareness of or reference to them. Through a Bourdieusian lens, our current position in any field is influenced by our habitus and the acquisition and exchange of capital, which extends beyond what we can explain immediately.

Similarly to Nash (2002), I argue that Bourdieu's approach is a useful vehicle to begin understanding the subject matter, that is the participatory trajectories in education. As claimed by Bhaskar (2014), to be in keeping with the epistemology of critical realism, the initial findings from the interviews cannot be seen as the 'answer', instead, they need to be examined in light of the real (i.e., the structures of capital) to address my research aims. This can facilitate a deeper analysis that may support, deny, or go beyond the theory to help build a more accurate view of reality (Fletcher, 2017). Therefore, I take a Bourdieusian approach through a critical realist framework to explore how first-generation students are enabled to enact educational success.

As such, the aims of this research are as follows:

- ❖ To explore how first-generation students navigate the educational environment;
- ❖ To identify the mechanisms that enable first-generation students to participate successfully in higher education; and
- ❖ To contribute to capital theory in the educational field.

4.2. Research Design

Understanding that in an open system, there may be more than one mechanism acting to produce the observed phenomenon meant that the research design required some thought. I suggest that from a critical realist perspective, it is important to interpret what participants mean in relation to their referents and the broader context, that what happens does not necessarily correspond to how they report it and that there are conditions and consequences regardless of their understanding. As presented in the above aims, discovering and understanding the mechanisms that enable educational success was a vital objective of this study and was more important than identifying how extensive the phenomenon was. As such, I took an intensive approach to the research design, starting with the individuals, tracing the primary relationships and interpreting meanings in context (Sayer, 2000).

In taking a critical realist perspective, I needed to unite the three levels of the empirical, the actual, and the real. It is crucial to demonstrate how the observed practices, the dispositions that generate them, and the social structures are linked. At this point, Nash (2002) argues that quantitative methods lose their applicability as, whilst observable and quantifiable

observations could identify a connection between the first two levels, bringing in the third level would be much more difficult. To demonstrate that the dispositions have been acquired through particular forms of structures to the degree that varies across individuals would not be something that could be operationalised and instead requires an in-depth qualitative approach to the methods of data collection.

To understand the meaning, we must put behaviour into context (Schutz et al., 1972), and it is through interviews that we can begin to access the context of people's behaviours (Seidman, 2013). At its basic, interviewing reflects my interest in understanding the experiences of first-generation students and the meaning they make of that experience. Interviews of this kind allow insight into critical experiences and change processes where narratives emerge and evolve through participants' accounts of motivations, decisions, barriers, and even successes (Evans, 2013), which would be difficult to demonstrate accurately using quantifiable measures. Interviews allow access to a reality experienced by the research subjects; however, it is essential to recognise the limitations on the understanding of others as it is impossible to dip into their stream of consciousness and understand it through their eyes. Through observing behaviours, we can obtain an observational understanding of certain behaviours; however, to fully understand the behaviour, we must obtain a subjective understanding of the behaviour; that is, we need to know what meaning those being observed place on that behaviour.

Through an intensive approach, which tends to align more with a qualitative methodology, I sought to explore the experiences of first-generation students throughout their entire educational journey to provide insights into the interplay between structure and agency. To do this, Steensen (2006) argues for a framework that explicitly acknowledges the reality of structures behind stories, in opposition to a hermeneutic framework at risk of producing only half-truths. As such, to understand experiences within a social or historical context, Merrill and West (2009) argue that you can utilise individual stories through a biographical research design. Therefore, the biographical approach towards the interview design intended to place individual experiences within the broader context of their lives as they described them and within the broader societal structures that engender inequality in education.

The biographical interviews were used to access the structures generally unobserved by participants but contributing to their related experiences. Using a structure loosely based on key educational milestones (primary, secondary, further, and higher education), I sought to understand their experiences and subjective understandings of their progression through education. At the same time, I used prompts for further discussions of participants' broader context, and these were theory-driven primarily in that they were based around the concepts

of capital and habitus, for example, interpersonal relationships, cultural activities, capabilities, aspirations, and motivations. These detailed accounts of what was happening around the interviewees during their educational participation allow us to position their educational experiences within a broader context of encompassing events. Furthermore, it is possible to position the individual experience within a much broader context considering societal structures and socioeconomic factors by prompting discussions around the broader family background, locality of upbringing, institutional structures, and higher education funding.

Through critical realism, I assume that subjective experience is not enough to reach a complex explanation because, in the moment, one cannot be aware of all historical and environmental factors that make up their contextual framework. However, I argue that biographical interviews can produce more than just a subjective narrative account; they have the scope to produce and analyse experiences and events in an insightful way that highlights the relationship between structure and agency, the generative mechanisms, and the interplay of social contexts (Smith & Elger, 2014). As described above, I utilised a semi-structured approach to biographical interviews to access and address the different levels of social reality, all of which are important forms of knowledge. In addressing their subjective experiences of education, we access the level of the empirical; through analysing the encompassing events and relationships taking place around the individual, we address the level of the actual, and through synthesising this with broader governmental and funding policies, as well as societal structures of socioeconomic inequality, we address the level of the real. Therefore, I strive to configure the relationships between the context, mechanisms, and outcomes (Mukumbang et al., 2020) to understand the activated or inactivated mechanisms that impact educational success.

In line with the nature of intensive data collection, I selected a semi-structured interview approach to enable a level of commonality amongst the data whilst also allowing for new ideas to emerge and a narrative of part of their life experiences. Semi-structured biographical interviews seemed appropriate as they are versatile, flexible, and require a certain level of previous knowledge to enable follow-up and probing questions (Kallio et al., 2016). Wengraf (2001) suggests that semi-structured interviews are often seen as an 'easy' option but further argues that they require more preparation, discipline, creativity, and time for analysis but can yield much more under the right conditions. In their systematic methodological review, Kallio et al. (2016) aimed to provide a framework for developing a semi-structured guide to improve the trustworthiness of qualitative research. The framework they developed was used as a guide for my research. It consisted of five stages: identifying

the prerequisites for using semi-structured interviews, retrieving and using previous knowledge, formulating the preliminary guide, pilot testing the guide, and presenting the complete guide (Kallio et al., 2016). I will further discuss how I addressed these stages in section 4.6, but it is proposed here that using semi-structured interviews was the most appropriate approach to address the aims of this research.

Others have argued that an essential aspect of conducting critical realist interviews is the knowledgeability of the interviewees, that is, identifying key 'informants' who have the knowledge of success in higher education to enable an interview where I can tease out the aspects of social reality discussed above (Mukumbang et al., 2020; Pawson & Tilley, 1997), I adopted the perspective that mechanisms are best identified not by counting the number of times you observe it happening but by discovering the nature of the people that possess the mechanism in question (Sayer, 2000). In so doing, I sought participants who were postgraduate researchers, i.e., those who were studying for either a Master of Science (by Research) or a Doctor of Philosophy degree, on the presupposition that these students have achieved success in the higher education environment. As part of this research, I was keen to understand how those who had not only accessed higher education but had successfully progressed through a bachelor's degree and on to postgraduate study have been enabled to continue their educational journey in this way. As such, I felt that the necessary mechanisms of success would have been activated in this group of participants.

During the development process of the research design, several activities were considered as pre-interview cueing exercises. I considered that to conduct a successful interview, it would be useful for participants to begin thinking about what was important to them, to position themselves ahead of the interview, and to pre-plan what they might reveal or not. Using this, I wanted my participants to be comfortable with the information they were sharing throughout the interview, and this seemed an appropriate activity for participants to begin considering different aspects of their lives before the interview. In a similar vein, I opted to collect some personal data for characteristics of age, gender, and ethnicity to understand any intersectionality among the groupings and details of their status at the university. I will further discuss the practicalities of this in section 4.6.

4.3. Researcher Positionality

When considering my position as a researcher, I found it crucial to consider the positions I held in relation to those I was researching. Reflexivity involves using a critical, self-aware lens to understand how my assumptions, background, and behaviours may have impacted the research process and the interpretation of my participants' lives (Finlay, 2017). A

researcher holds several social positions in relation to the researched, and these positions impact the way research is undertaken and data is analysed (Berger, 2015). Whilst there is not space within this thesis to consider in detail all of my social positions (i.e., those relating to gender, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age, political affiliation, and disability status), I will focus on my position as a first-generation student and a postgraduate researcher, therefore sharing several characteristics and experiences with my participants, whilst simultaneously being a member of staff at the same university with clear outsider and power dynamics at play. Given these roles, I considered whether I could objectively represent my research. It may be that there can be no neutrality as such; however, there can be more or less awareness of one's biases, so through demonstrating transparency and accountability, I aim to add methodological rigour (Nilan, 2002). A discussion of these roles follows to disentangle some ethical dilemmas that arose and highlight my level of sincerity as a researcher (Tracy, 2010). Furthermore, I will reflect on how these positions complicate the insider-outsider binary.

4.3.1. Being a First-Generation Student

As discussed in the prologue to this thesis, I am a first-generation student and, therefore, considered how my experience and familiarity with the topic of study would impact my interaction with participants. Reflecting on this, I initially hesitated about offering many personal details about my status, feeling that participants would assume I was also a first-generation student anyway. I felt that this hesitance would serve my research project well, avoiding self-indulgence over my own experiences, helping to maintain a distinction between the researcher and the researched, and ultimately offering a certain level of credibility. However, this approach failed to consider how well I could serve my participant's needs, who were often keen to know about my experience and journey into higher education. This became apparent during the pilot interviews, where I was directly asked about this, and the subject also arose organically through our discussions. Being open about this yielded more deep and meaningful discussions of what it meant to be a first-generation student than the distanced and 'professional' approach had. Others have echoed a similar experience (Berger, 2015), with Valentine (2007) suggesting that this should be viewed as an ethical consideration of 'owing it' to the interviewees to be honest and open about one's motivations for conducting the research. Therefore, in the proceeding interviews, I discussed my status where appropriate.

Dwyer (2009) argues that having an insider status of this kind means that participants assume a shared understanding and distinctiveness, which may result in a greater willingness to accept you and share their experiences. However, I was cautious of assuming

that our experiences would have been similar or that we shared the same language; as Finlay (2002, p. 537) argues, “if I failed to do so, I might have missed the point”. When researchers and the researched share experiences, there is a potential that the participants will observe this familiarity and may overlook discussing some points they deem to be taken for granted or obvious, so certain aspects of their experiences could be missed. In understanding this, I engaged in an autoethnographic reflective activity when piloting the study to understand better my assumptions and beliefs about being a first-generation student. I will offer further reflections on this process in section 4.6. However, I mention it here to demonstrate how I came to understand my narrative and began comprehending the complexity and diversity of individual narratives. This also meant that I became aware of other personal characteristics, such as age, gender, class, ethnicity, language, and beliefs, that I should consider in relation to the participants (Berger, 2015). As such, I made attempts during interviews to internally monitor my reactions to participants and actively consider whether I needed to ask for clarification to confirm or reject such assumptions.

These assumptions of shared understanding were important for reflexively considering my position as a first-generation student in relation to my participants. Whilst there were several moments of similarity where I felt a distinct sense of “me too” (Warin, 2011, p. 811) in their responses, there were several others where I realised how different and diverse our experiences were. Like Finn (2015) concluded in her book on the experiences of young women in higher education, I pondered whether it would be ‘naïve’ to consider myself fully embodying an insider position. As highlighted above, there are several other characteristics that I did not necessarily share with my participants (age, gender, etc.), as well as differing experiences of education, relationships, and locality. However, it may be useful to consider insider research as a “non-absolute concept” whereby the proximity to participants outweighs the differences in any particular context. Understanding it in this way recognises the dynamic and relational complexities of the social world that, perhaps, could not be appreciated through insider-outsider binary absoluteness. I considered that our shared experience of being first-generation was more significant than some other factors, and thus, I occupied a space that leaned more toward being an insider than an outsider.

It seems prudent to acknowledge that my first-generation student and researcher position was influenced by the pre-existing theoretical notion of capital underpinning the experience. I was conscious that starting the research from this position might mean I missed other possible explanations or offered a particular representation of the data to make it fit my conceptual understanding. I reflected on this during the interview and analysis stages, considering whether the theory of capital was helpful and whether it needed to be modified

or rejected altogether. This was aided by the understanding that first-generation students, as a group, already go against the status quo argued for in Bourdieu's concept of capital. Bourdieu argues that those less privileged have less access to capital, which produces inequality and contributes to poorer success in education. The fact that first-generation students break this cycle meant that I was open to rejecting this theory as an explanation for educational success. What will be presented in the analysis chapters then is an exploration of the ways this theory can be modified and furthered to explain the phenomenon in question.

4.3.2. Being a Postgraduate Researcher and Member of Staff

I also held two other positions concerning my participants: being a postgraduate researcher and an administrative staff member, both roles in the same institution. These roles meant I was known to several participants before the research took place and simultaneously positioned me as an insider and an outsider. Savvides et al. (2014) argue that qualitative researchers must be ethical, accountable, and open throughout the research process. Here, I will consider and make transparent the potential impact this has.

I acknowledge that both positions may have enabled me to recruit participants more easily, so I was aware there were potential power dynamics to be negotiated and a need not to be coercive in my recruitment approach. To try and minimise the effects of this, I used emails as my chosen form of communication to reduce the pressure that someone may feel in a face-to-face conversation. I also sent recruitment emails to a generic mailing list, giving details of the criteria that must be met to volunteer for this study. I was unaware of who within the group would meet my specified criteria, so I was unable to approach anyone at a personal level. Discussions around my research naturally arose in face-to-face conversations. So, I was conscious of only being reactive to their enquiry of potential participation rather than proactive in my recruitment.

I further considered whether these positions would impact how participants discussed their stories during the interview. I concluded that given that the focus of my interview was concerned with events before commencing postgraduate study rather than their experience of postgraduate study, there would be less discomfort than when discussing themselves in the present. I developed the interview guide to converse chronologically, prompting my participants through educational milestones. At the point of the interview, where we moved to a discussion of the present, the interview structure was left open, allowing the participants to explore aspects of their current educational endeavour to the level they felt comfortable with. I have since observed through the transcripts of the interviews that there seemed just

as much comfort in discussing this arena as there was in prior endeavours. However, there were occasions when my role as a staff member became more apparent and of potential concern for the participants, for example, asking for confirmation that this would be kept confidential from a particular staff member. This potential drawback of my position within the university made me consider whether other participants had held back information on these grounds. In response, I reassured the participants of their anonymity, which seemed to ease apprehension.

As alluded to in the prologue to this thesis, my positionality remained at the forefront of my consciousness throughout the research journey. Occupying the roles of fellow postgraduate researcher and supportive staff member meant that my insider-outsider status fluctuated when interacting with participants. Indeed, in many cases, it felt as though this status changed even within the same interaction where I was, perhaps, an insider and an outsider simultaneously (Bukamal, 2022). This blurring of the boundary between my student and professional identities led me to consider whether the insider-outsider binary was too simplistic to understand my position concerning my participants. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) argue that the hyphen in 'insider-outsider' acts as "a third space, a space between, a space of paradox, ambiguity, and ambivalence" (p. 60) whereby researchers occupy the space between being an insider and an outsider. Furthermore, to move beyond this simple dichotomy, it may be crucial for researchers to *activate* the hyphen when reflexively considering complex researcher-participant relationships (Humphrey, 2007). Therefore, in reflecting on this, I consider that the hyphen represents a continuum on which I was sometimes closer to the insider position and sometimes closer to the outsider position, perhaps never fully occupying one or the other. I do not propose a solution to successfully managing this position, but I simply aim to demonstrate reflexivity and transparency in connection with the complexity of my relationship with the participants.

In my experience as a doctoral researcher, the community amongst peers allows for a culture based on sharing knowledge and understanding. The culture in which I have undertaken this research is supportive, with peers helping each other in their research endeavours, sharing knowledge and participating in others' research. I would not consider this position to be of ethical concern; quite the contrary, I feel it enabled participants to be more open and honest in the interviews with me, as the researcher, whom they accepted more completely (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) and whose inquiry was from a position of equity rather than from a power hierarchy. This is not to suggest that there was no power dynamic at play here but that it seemed this peer relationship dominated the interpersonal nature of the connection between myself and the participants rather than that of my professional role. This was evidenced to me after the official interview ended, and many were keen to further

discuss my motivations and experiences as a doctoral researcher and a first-generation student.

4.4. Consent, Confidentiality and Anonymity

Ethical issues required much thought as I discussed many critical aspects of their personal lives and the meanings they attached to certain educational experiences. The university ethics panel granted full ethical approval before data collection. All participants were given an information sheet (Appendix 1) and gave informed consent via an online instrument before the interviews (Appendix 2). Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw before or during the interview and anytime within 12 months of the interview. Participants were fully informed of the purpose of the study and were advised that a decision not to take part or to withdraw from the study would not affect their studies at the university in any way.

Consideration of issues of confidentiality also formed part of obtaining ethical approval. Given the nature of research like this, I could not guarantee confidentiality to my participants since I would be analysing transcripts of their interviews and writing about their experiences in this thesis and other publications. However, I obtained their consent for both the research findings to be disseminated and for their words to be quoted (using a pseudonym). Interviews were recorded using a portable password-protected device and transferred to a password-protected computer as soon as possible after the interview. The transcribed data were anonymised and password-protected to protect confidentiality and anonymity as far as possible.

Participants were informed that their identity would be protected using pseudonyms (I allocated these names) and that no written information that could lead to them being identified would be included in any examination, publication, or presentation. I also confirmed that this may be breached only if I believed I, or someone else, was at risk of harm. To further protect anonymity throughout this thesis, I have decided not to disclose the participant's disciplines as this could considerably narrow down the potential sample pool and, along with the other identifiers in the next section, could result in participants being identified if someone was so inclined to do so. I have also omitted and changed a few minor details such as names (family members, workplaces, etc.), places (neighbourhoods, etc.), personal characteristics (physical appearance, etc.), or interests (sports, etc.) that could identify participants but that are not significant enough to impact the findings of this study.

4.5. Participants

As with any research, the parameters for inclusion and exclusion of study participants were formed before recruitment. The main criterion was that the participants should be the first in their immediate family to go to university, in that neither parents nor siblings had previously commenced study at a higher education level. As per my discussions in Chapter Three regarding the definitions used in other studies, I felt it incumbent to consider siblings as crucial mobilisers of capital and social mobility within the family environment. Therefore, I chose to include siblings in the same category as parents so that the data would reflect those with minimal means of acquiring capital related to the higher education environment through the family. The criteria also stated that participants must have been educated in the UK to help mediate any cultural or social misunderstandings of education systems in other countries, which may vary from that in the UK. All participants were postgraduate research students from a post-1992 institution in the North of England. Postgraduate research, rather than postgraduate taught, students were chosen for this sample, mainly due to ease of access to the sample through my employment and studies at the university.

This study did not set out with a predetermined number of participants I hoped to recruit. As I did not know the potential target group size, I continued recruiting participants and collecting data until I reached 'saturation'. This type of data saturation was reached when nothing new was becoming apparent in the data, and an adequate understanding had been reached (Saunders et al., 2018). Through a small pilot study and three bouts of recruitment, 34 potential participants volunteered to take part in the study; two of these were later excluded as they did not fit the inclusion criteria (one had undertaken primary school education abroad, and one had a parent who had commenced, but not completed, a higher education degree) and a further two decided to withdraw from the study before interview due to competing time demands. The audio recording failed in one of my interviews. I decided at the point of realising this not to request that the participant partake in a second interview as I was conscious of their time and work pressures. It seemed a more ethical decision not to put this pressure on the participant. However, I did take extensive notes immediately after the interview, audio recording myself to capture as much information as possible. Even though this interview transcript would differ from the other participant interviews, I still decided to include this within the dataset. As such, the following thesis will focus on interviews with 30 participants. Table 6 details the participants grouped by biographical characteristics, and Appendix 3 offers a full breakdown of participant characteristics.

Table 6*Participants grouped by biographical characteristics.*

Category	Specific	Number
Age	21-25	9
	26-30	9
	31-35	2
	36-40	3
	41-45	4
	46-50	1
	50+	2
Gender	Female	19
	Male	11
Ethnicity	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	29
	Black, African, Caribbean, or Black British - Caribbean	1
Course	PhD	26
	MSc by Research	4
Previous Institution	Same Institution	23
	Different Institution	7

For the reasons outlined earlier in this thesis, I have not focused on the classifications of these participants in terms of their social class background. However, reflecting on some of their demographic characteristics seems important to consider whether they represent the postgraduate research body. To put the sample in context, I examined national data produced by HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency – an agency that collects and disseminates data relating to higher education in the UK) (2023) for the 2018/19 academic year as this was the timeframe when I conducted most of the interviews. The distribution across the age groups offers a fair representation of the wider body, accounting for the differences in age brackets, with HESA reporting 24% were 21-24 years, 33% were 25-29 years, and 43% were 30 years and over. The distribution across gender groups was less representative than the data produced by HESA, as they reported that 51% were female and 49% were male. Whilst this does not directly reflect my sample, I do consider that my sample reflects the higher proportion of female postgraduate research students, with the number of male participants still allowing for different gender voices to be represented in my analysis. All my participants identified their gender as either male or female. The distribution across

ethnic groups, however, is of note, with only one participant not from a White–British background. A report by AdvanceHE (2019) outlined how 17.2% of the postgraduate research community was from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background, highlighting the inequality in access for these students. Although this thesis has no space to consider this in great detail, I acknowledge that my sample falls short of representing this group fairly, and I will offer some discussion of this in the concluding chapter.

4.6. Data Collection

In this section, I will offer a more detailed description of the methods used and how I conducted data collection. I will begin by discussing my use of a pilot study, followed by recruitment details and the interviewing process.

4.6.1. The Pilot Study

Reflexivity plays a significant role in the research design and the design of specific methods. Early in the development of the interview schedule, I used my developing ideas as a basis for writing an auto-ethnographical piece in which I took the role of the interviewee and considered my journey and position in relation to the questions I was asking. This was an important part of the process, given my different roles (as a postgraduate researcher, a first-generation student, and a staff member). I engaged in discussions with my supervisor, whose feedback enabled reflexive thoughts on my position and gave further direction for my interviews. In understanding my assumptions and expectations about the nature of first-generation status, I came to understand my trajectory in more fruitful ways, moving beyond surface understandings of my journey through education to reflecting on the underlying presence of structures, relationships, and moments that enabled my progression. This was mainly achieved by thinking beyond the question set I had initially produced and, therefore, the interview schedule developed into a more open structure, using several prompts to myself for more probing and nuanced questions along the way.

Following this process, I used three early interviews as pilot interviews conducted in November and December 2017 to check whether the interview schedule generated the anticipated data. Minor amendments to the interview schedule were made, mainly consisting of more detailed prompts. I conducted these interviews with three individuals who had actively offered to participate in my study before the full recruitment commenced. The pilot interviews remained sufficiently similar to the remainder of the interviews and were therefore included in the dataset. These pilot interviews also prompted the idea that obtaining basic biographical information from the participants and using a cueing exercise to help initiate thoughts on their self-awareness would be useful.

4.6.2. Recruitment and Pre-interview

The primary data collection phase lasted for nine months and took place between July 2018 and April 2019, and I made three recruitment calls during this time: July 2018, September 2018 and February 2019. The recruitment calls were made via email circulation of a flyer (Appendix 4) to a generic postgraduate researcher mailing list. The email included brief details of the research along with criteria for participation and asked potential participants to contact me via the given email address. Upon volunteers contacting me, I sent them a link to an online instrument, which included the information sheet, consent form, questions on basic personal information, and a cueing exercise.

The personal information (Appendix 5) asked closed questions in response to questions on age, gender, ethnicity, course, and where they studied for their previous degree. The cueing exercise (Appendix 6) was an open-ended question set that asked for 20 responses to the question "Who am I?" and the answers were framed in a sentence that began "I am..." Participants were asked to give honest answers in any order and not worry about ordering or ranking their responses. They were advised that the statements may range from emotions and attitudes to relationships and membership, from in-the-moment thoughts to longer-term ideas. Initially, I had intended to use these responses as part of the analysis, but in the end, I felt that they did not contribute much to the data. However, I do feel it contributed to the interview process. This exercise encouraged participants to think beyond their immediate conceptions of who they were and position themselves in a broader context. In some cases, this seemed a helpful exercise as participants made reference to this during their interview, for example, that it helped them to consider the many roles they had (as a mother, daughter, sister, wife, student, employee) or their characteristics (smart, open-minded, passionate, anxious, survivor). At the end of this, participants were directed to a link for a Doodle poll where they could indicate a time that they would be available for the interview.

This process proved a very efficient and effective way to recruit participants. The online instrument helped to reduce paper copies of information sheets and consent forms, and the Doodle poll reduced the back and forth of emails to arrange the interview for both the participants and me. Some adjustments were made to the availability of times to book an interview as I began conducting the interviews. I was initially keen to conduct several interviews in one day due to my time and work commitments. However, I underestimated the fatigue I would experience from each interview and adjusted the timings accordingly to allow a maximum of two per day. This was not only for my self-preservation but because I felt I owed it to the participants to be fully engaged and participatory in the interview.

4.6.3. *The Interviews*

Once participants had completed the pre-interview online instrument detailed above, I contacted them to confirm a suitable date and time for their interview. I conducted most of the interviews in a private room on the university campus, except for three, which were conducted via Skype for the ease of my participants (due to living at a distance from the university). Participants were invited to take a seat wherever they felt most comfortable; some chose to sit beside me, and some decided to sit across the table. For those interviews via Skype, I ensured they could talk freely and that the technology was working; participants were allowed to have their cameras on or off and mine was kept on so they could see me throughout. All participants chose to keep their cameras on. The length of the interviews varied with a range from 54 minutes to two hours and two minutes with a mean average of one hour and 19 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded using a password-protected device.

I used an interview schedule (Appendix 7), and in keeping with the biographical format, each interview began with a general overview of what we would discuss, starting with some questions regarding family background in education and employment and then moving on to discuss aspects of their educational journey. To prompt a move during the interview, I focused on the main academic milestones of primary, secondary, further, and higher education. Each move started with an open question such as “Tell me about what you remember from primary school” or “Tell me about your move to secondary school,” followed by prompts for more detail. As the research continued, I noticed people were making specific references to being first-generation, so I pursued this enquiry at appropriate times. Early in the data collection process, I realised the importance of a semi-structured approach to the interview as I began to understand the huge variance in life journeys and how not everyone has followed what would be described as the traditional route through education.

Considerable flexibility in the process was necessary when participants offered complex educational journeys, such as when they had left education to go into employment or those who had moved between several educational institutions at any one stage. This meant adapting the questions to fit the circumstances offered by the participants and allowing them to direct the interview to fit their journeys.

At the end of each interview, I asked participants whether there was anything further they would like to discuss or whether they would like to ask me any questions. At this stage, several participants asked me about my experience as a first-generation student or stated that until they received my recruitment email, they had not considered this a factor important to them, which often prompted further discussions. Because of this, I developed our

discussions by asking direct questions about being first-generation. It was beneficial for the analysis as it allowed a richer understanding of how they perceived this status. After the interview, I thanked the participants for their time and stopped the recording. At this stage, I gave them the voucher promised for their participation, and we both signed a document confirming this had been presented (Appendix 8).

Using monetary incentives for participation in this research was an ethical consideration. At first glance, it seemed appropriate to incentivise participants' time and effort in participating in a potentially lengthy and in-depth interview. However, it was necessary to consider whether this would constitute a level of coercion or compromise the dignity of the participants (Grant & Sugarman, 2004). As discussed in section 4.3, whilst there were potential power dynamics through my position as a researcher and staff member, the insider status of being a first-generation student and a fellow postgraduate researcher reduced the power dynamic and using a monetary incentive seemed innocuous. As the data collection progressed, it became evident that this was often not even perceived as an incentive, with many participants stating that they did not realise, or had forgotten, that there was a voucher for them at the end.

4.7. Analysis

To meet the aims of this research, I analysed the interview transcripts using thematic analysis and narrative constructions. The thematic analysis allowed me to draw patterns across the data set, and the narrative constructions offered insight into individual experiences and biographies. This section will explore these in more detail.

4.7.1. Thematic Analysis

Thematic Analysis (TA) is a common form of analysis for textual data. However, there have been debates over the suitability of iterations of TA for different theoretical approaches in recent years (Danermark, 2019; Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021). The approach that has become the most influential is that of Braun and Clarke (2006), who offered TA as a flexible tool to examine complex data in a rich and detailed way. Due to the approach being “essentially independent of theory and epistemology” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78), it is argued that it can be used across a range of approaches, including critical realism, and “can be a method that works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of reality” (p. 81). At the core of any TA approach is the aim of identifying themes or patterns in the data that capture an important part of the data in relation to the research questions.

In line with this approach, the first step of my analysis was transcribing the interview recordings, which was important to complete myself for prolonged engagement with the

data. Altogether, the interview time was around 40 hours, and I completed the transcription at a speed of about four hours to every one hour of interview time. Transcription was aided using the software 'Express Scribe' and a foot pedal for playing and pausing the recordings. After an initial period of transcribing the three pilot interviews, the remaining transcription was completed after all the interviews had taken place. I transcribed the interviews as verbatim, including verbal pauses such as "erm", false starts, and repetitions, but omitted details such as length of pause and throat clearing, for example, as it did not seem these would affect the meaning. I anonymised the transcripts using a pseudonym and omitted or changed any personal details necessary. After transcribing all the interviews, I read through the entire data set.

I then systematically worked through the interview transcripts to code the data set using 'NVivo' software. I intentionally did not work through the transcripts chronologically, instead choosing to address each one alphabetically using participants' pseudonyms. I was conscious that my confidence and interview style had developed throughout the data collection process, and this approach allowed me to pay equal attention to each transcript (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At this stage, I was conscious of the underlying assumptions of the theoretical framework within which I was working. With specific aims in mind, I concluded that my approach was theory-driven but that my coding would be as data-led as possible. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that you may need to keep certain questions in mind during a theory-driven approach and, therefore, my coding was centred around aspects of the data that impacted engagement and participation in education, paying particular attention to notions that generated positive outcomes.

I coded the transcripts as broadly as possible, and extracts were ascribed to as many codes as necessary to ensure the meaning was retained – see Table 7 for an example of this. Through my critical realist lens, I was attending to the level of the empirical during this process as a way of understanding how my participants experienced the educational world. This process was organic, meaning that the codes developed as I understood the data more thoroughly, rather than the codes being fixed and predetermined. This approach is more in line with Braun and Clarke's more recent iteration of TA in which they argue for a reflexive TA that is less about "accurate and reliable coding" and more about the role of the researcher's reflexivity and subjectivity in interpreting the data and engaging with the process of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). As such, this process was not linear. Instead, it required me to question and reflect on the assumptions and interpretations I made during the coding process.

Table 7

Example of coded extracts

Extract from transcript	Initial Code(s)
<i>I didn't want to be like my mum and be struggling and almost regretting not taking the chances in terms of education and fulfilling stuff like that to be able to do things that I could potentially be good at and do better in life. So, I think that's not her actual experience influenced me, but not wanting to be like her.</i>	Family as a negative exemplar
<i>We had loads and loads and loads of books like my dad loves to read too, and I always remember he said that "I don't want you to read to be good at reading, but it's important for me that you can read for pleasure, to enjoy reading."</i>	Family encouragement of activities

The third phase of the analysis process consisted of searching for themes which involved going beyond the codes to focus the analysis on a broader level (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In a reflexive TA, themes are developed from codes and are conceptualised as “patterns of shared meanings underpinned by a central organising concept” rather than a summary of a topic (Braun & Clarke, 2020, p. 39). I started thinking about the relationship between the codes and organised the codes into broader themes. My initial sorting of the codes resulted in a rather semantic thematic structure which grouped codes of a similar nature without particularly looking at the data through my theoretical framework. For example, this resulted in all codes that referred to notions of support and understanding within the educational environment being placed under an overarching theme of *support and understanding*. This stage helped me understand the next level in critical realism –the actual –the encompassing events that are taking place but might not be directly observable.

The idea of a fundamental concept for each theme meant I began reflecting on the data through my theoretical and critical realist understandings. Whilst the coding process was mostly data-driven, this next analysis step shifted to a top-down approach, viewing the data through my theoretical gaze. As highlighted above, this was not a linear process, and I had already noted potential themes during the interviewing and transcribing process. For example, what struck me early on in my research was the impact of relationships on engagement with and participation in the educational environment; thereby, I had considered

that this would form, at least in part, some of my thematic structure. What I had not envisioned until this stage of the analysis process was quite how powerful and prevalent the notion of relationship was for my participants.

I began working through each code to clarify my understanding of the code and started interpreting the codes meaningfully and in relation to my aims. I used the description function within NVivo to begin interpreting and redescribing the codes in a way that had my conceptual lens as the focus. If we take the first code identified in Table 7 – *family as a negative exemplar* – as an example, I first clarified the description of the code and then redescribed it to explain, in more general terms, what possible assumptions could be made about the sample as a whole – see Table 8 for an example. This enabled me to generate a thematic structure based on my interpretations of the extracts and the proceeding codes. This process, called ‘abduction’, is becoming more common in critical realist methodology, and it gives a more general form to the phenomena through redescribing and recontextualising empirical data (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021).

Table 8

Example of interpretation of analytic codes

Code	Description	Interpretation
<i>Family as a negative exemplar</i>	Drawing on family members as reverse role models, i.e., whom they do not want to be like	First-generation students often understand their own educational participation and future aspirations through the potentially negative experiences of their families.

At this stage, it was important to review the themes that had developed through engaging with the coding structure. This meant reflecting on whether the extracts within each theme were coherent, meaningful and had clear and distinct boundaries (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Throughout this process, my understanding of the data shifted and led me to amend some overarching themes and re-code some extracts. For example, the extract offered in Table 9 was initially coded to *family supporting education and family not supporting education*, as the participant seemed to be discussing a juxtaposed perspective on the support her family gave. However, on reflection, it appeared that she was not suggesting her family did not support her education, just that they lacked understanding of the subject knowledge.

Therefore, a new code emerged called *family not understanding education* and extracts under the initial code were re-coded where appropriate.

Table 9

Example of coded extract review changes

Extract	Code
<p><i>As soon as I got passed, say, primary school early stages of high school; they were like, “We can’t really help you with it; we don’t know what you’re on about”, so they were very supportive in saying “you need to be getting on with this, you need to do your revision, you’ve got an exam coming up, have you sorted your revision out? do you feel confident you can do it?” and everything, they couldn’t really offer any help in terms of helping us through it.</i></p>	<p>Initial code (1) - <u>Family supporting education</u> (initial code remained)</p> <p>Initial code (2) - Family not supporting education changed to <u>Family not understanding education</u></p>

Through reviewing these codes and themes, I shifted into phase five of Braun and Clarke’s suggested steps for a coherent TA, which meant identifying the “essence” of each theme (2006, p. 92). To produce a more latent thematic structure, I needed to use my conceptual lens to examine the underlying assumptions and ideas that inform the semantic level of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Further, from my critical realist perspective, I needed to shift to understanding the structures and underlying mechanisms (the level of the real) prevalent in the data, which could explain the successful educational experiences of these first-generation students. This meant reflecting on questions with explanatory power, such as: what is happening that enables participation? And what properties exist that make it so? (Sayer, 1992; Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021). This type of critical realist thought operation is called ‘retroduction’, and the main aim of this process is to identify and explain the underlying mechanisms of the phenomenon (Blom & Morén, 2011) as well as to generate the central organising concept for each theme. Therefore, I began more systematically applying notions of capital theory to understand what capital my participants had access to, how they acquired it, and what they did with it once they had it. Viewing the extracts and the coding structure in this way allowed for “creative and interpretive stories about the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594) to be constructed and suggestive of the generative mechanisms that enabled successful participation. At this stage, the power of relationship – the use-value of social capital – became evident. In examining what worked for whom and in what context, I began to understand how the utilisation of social capital was inherent in the

mechanisms that enabled success in education. From this, a thematic map was produced, outlining the themes and sub-themes on which this thesis is based.

The final phase of the TA was to produce a report that showcases the complex data story convincingly and coherently (Braun & Clarke, 2006) - this is presented in the following chapters. Throughout the analytic process outlined above, I took note of particularly insightful extracts that were exemplary of the different themes as well as ones that felt typical of what informants said. Further, I was careful to include excerpts representing the participants across the data set to showcase the prevalence of each theme amongst the participants in this research. However, there is not space within this thesis to offer multitudinous quotes in support of each discussion point, and as a result, the quotes that are presented in the forthcoming chapters are illustrative rather than evidence of those points. In other words, my approach to the use of quotes is a standard one in qualitative research (Eldh et al., 2020). These quotes have been selected because they encapsulate the themes identified across all interviews and reflect the recurring patterns in the data. Numerous other similar quotes could have been used, such was the richness and extent of the data that I gathered.

4.7.2. Narrative Construction

While interpreting the data using TA was an important way to understand the data set, I considered whether it would be sufficient to meet my aims. Namely, analysing my participants' stories only thematically would potentially offer a fragmented insight into their experiences, which could be dislocated from their context (Snape, 2019). The construction of narratives supplements my analysis as it allows for actions, events, and happenings to be synthesised and configured to produce stories as an outcome of research (Polkinghorne, 1995). In this section, I will explore the purpose of these individual biographical stories, how they were constructed, and the ways in which they contribute to the analysis.

Purpose and Contribution

Constructing narrative accounts of individual life biographies enables researchers to organise larger datasets around the stories of a smaller number of people (such as Ball et al., 2000). Finn (2015, p. 155) advocates that there is room within higher education research for “a range of questions, theories, voices and ways of presenting data” to identify and explore relational connections. Furthermore, in telling stories, we should focus on description as much as other analytical tools (Finn, 2015). This practice has been used in retrospective research to understand how individuals came to be where they are now (Johnston et al., 2000) and in studies which seek to understand the experience of a particular period in time

(Snape, 2019; Sung, 2023). It has similarly been used in qualitative longitudinal research to examine transitions and changes over time (Finn, 2015; Thomson & Holland, 2003).

One of the main purposes of constructing individual stories from interviews is to conjure insights into the continuous and developing story of the person rather than only “chunking” the meanings into thematic forms (Henderson et al., 2012, p. 28). Polkinghorne (1995) argues that several events can be drawn together to demonstrate the relationships between themes, identify causal, correlational or influential linkages and offer a coherent story of how a series of happenings led to a particular outcome. This is an extension of my critical realist position in that through understanding experiences and events within the wider context of biography, we can begin to understand the underlying mechanisms that enabled their participation and success in the educational environment. The stories then represent a more holistic approach to analysis, allowing me to understand and present the interconnected nature of individual happenings. The individual biographies complement thematic analysis, yet they have analytical power in their own right by way of examining the changing nature of experiences and participation in education over time.

In the chapters that follow, I will present the stories of six people: Lucy, Lydia, Christina, Annie, George, and David. I decided to include six stories as it seemed a suitable number which would offer a representation of the diversity of experiences and enough space to demonstrate the complexity of the stories being told. These six were chosen because they exemplify the range of experiences and trajectories which led to educational success. Echoing research by Johnston et al. (2000), I argue that these stories “are not extraordinary ones” (p. 7) and equally, others could have been chosen to represent the findings in this thesis. Following the thematic analysis, the stories were selected based on my subjective interpretations of those which best exemplified the themes, and which offered the most rich and meaningful insight into the mechanisms of successful participation. However, I acknowledge that this is representative of my interpretation of the data, which ultimately was influenced by my theoretical and ontological alignment. Whilst I have chosen to put these six stories in the ‘limelight’, it is important to highlight that the thematic analysis and subsequent findings are indicative of all 30 participants, and the analysis and conclusion I present in the thesis are based on all the interviews, not just these six cases.

In considering how to position the six stories within the structure of this thesis, I chose to present two stories at the beginning of each analysis chapter. The decision to begin each chapter in this way meant that the participants' experiences and stories of success remained the “focal point” of the thesis (Finn, 2015, p. 155). In addition, the position of the stories acts to introduce the theme explored in each chapter and to situate the themed discussion within

individual narratives. To reflect the interconnected analysis of the themes and the stories, it seemed appropriate to present the stories within the thematic structure of the analysis chapters rather than as a standalone chapter. As such, each chapter moves from the specific individual narrative to the more general thematic discussion, which incorporates the stories of all participants. The stories presented in each proceeding chapter represent the discussed theme. However, they are not mutually exclusive and, therefore, also overlap with the themes offered in the other analysis chapters.

Process of Construction

Once I had selected the participants for the narrative construction process, I began reading through their interview transcripts, highlighting important sections, and making notes. The notes focused on three elements: firstly, reference to their background, such as home environment, occupations and educational levels of their family members; secondly, the key events and reflections as described by my participants in connection with their educational journeys; and thirdly, concerning the themes already identified. The importance of relationships and critical moments had already been identified in the data and, as such, these were pertinent areas to note. As previously highlighted, constructing stories aims to gain insight into the person as a whole and understand how they develop and change over time. Keeping these elements in mind whilst taking notes meant that I could develop my understanding of how events and happenings are often not a single isolated moment but a complex culmination of prior experiences that come together and enable successful participation in education.

I then worked through the notes to construct a story which followed the participants' progression through education. I began each story with a brief description of their family's geographical, educational, and occupational backgrounds, and I ended each story with details of their position at the time of the interview. This was to provide the contextual surroundings for the events in the middle and to provide some consistency across the stories. Given the biographical structure of the interview schedule, the transcripts already, for the most part, offered a chronological insight into their educational experiences. Thereby the formation of a plot was straightforward. However, the semi-structured nature of the interview meant that deviation from the schedule happened regularly, so it was necessary to re-organise events and happenings in some cases.

The decision to write the stories in the third person was to be transparent and indicate to the reader that the narratives were constructed by the researcher rather than the participants. This seemed essential in acknowledging my subjective contribution to the stories and the

critical relationship between the researcher, the participants, and the reader (Tierney, 2002). However, I was keen for the stories “to capture something of the voice of the participant” (Henderson et al., 2012, p. 21), so I used their phrases where appropriate, but summarising and interpretation were also necessary. In Appendix 9, I refer to an extract from Lucy’s story to illustrate how the story reflected the words and meanings in the participants’ transcripts. On the one hand, I used direct phrases in the story to show how Lucy felt that “primary school was a really positive experience”. On the other hand, Lucy’s enjoyment was told through a vignette of being able to “build”, “show”, “play”, and “draw”, which I interpreted and summarised in the story as “...she could express herself creatively...”. Direct quotes (as indicated using speech marks) seemed particularly important when choosing to use potentially colloquial, loaded, or demeaning words as part of the stories. For example, one participant spoke about growing up in a “rough” area, and another described themselves as the “class clown” – using direct quotes in this way meant that it would be clear to the reader that these were participants’ reflections and not aspersions cast by the researcher.

Finally, I checked the constructed story against the original transcript to ensure that I had not missed any key events and that it represented the participant's reflections well, adjusting where necessary. Further editing was then conducted to ensure the stories were succinct and fit the scale and scope of this thesis.

4.8. Conclusions

In this chapter, I have outlined how my philosophical and theoretical position has underpinned my methodological choices. I have presented one possible way to understand the resulting data, though there are other potential ways. By mapping it onto a critical realist framework, I have argued that first-generation success in higher education can be understood by identifying the mechanisms that enable that success. To do this, I have taken a biographical approach to data collection, whereby the participants are those who have, by definition, already been successful in higher education, and, therefore, it is assumed that the mechanisms I aimed to identify would have been enabled in this group. By examining the participants’ experiences of education and the events that occur around them, I argue that this allows access to the underlying capital structures that are available for them to participate with. This detailed and close-up approach contributes to the under-researched question of educational success and postgraduate research students as a group.

The following chapters will present an analysis and discussion of the data, organised into the three overarching themes identified through the thematic analysis. Each chapter will begin by presenting two participants’ stories, followed by the sub-themes that contribute to the overall theme discussion. The chapters offer each theme as an individual entity, but they are

inextricably connected and overlap in several ways. They are also presented in an order that demonstrates the participants' dynamic relationship with education and other people as they progress through their trajectories over time.

5. Chapter Five - Family Support: The Mobilisation of Capital

In this chapter, I present an analysis that explores how, during their earlier schooling, first-generation students experienced support through the relationships in their familial networks. I offer a discussion that argues that despite not having university-educated parents, they could navigate their relationship with education by drawing on the strengths of their interpersonal relationships with their parents and other caregivers. Through these relationships, they began to understand that education provided them with an opportunity for different life outcomes than had previously been prevalent in their family histories.

'Support' is a widely used term in academia and everyday life, but it is not widely operationalised. In this chapter, I will explore what support means in this context and how it is enacted through the parent-child relationship as a mechanism that enables participation in education. I have identified, from interviews, three forms that 'support' can take: 1) communicating the value of education, 2) being interested and involved in educational progression, and 3) the provision of a facilitative learning environment. Through these supportive relationships, first-generation students could begin to position themselves as someone who can participate in education and realise that education is an opportunity that could lead to future success.

Although the interviewees did not always identify some acts as directly or explicitly facilitative, the supportive nature of their relationships allowed them to access forms of capital that were enabling in the educational environment. The close-knit relationships within the home environment with key family members enabled the first-generation students in this research to use their capital meaningfully and with some use value for progressing through education. Through the participants' experiences, I will explore how the social capital inherent in their familial relationships revealed the potential value of investing the capital they already had and accumulating more capital that would be useful for progressing to higher education. By examining this notion of support, I will contribute to understanding social capital and its relevance in influencing future first-generation students' progression into higher education - that family support, as a form of social capital, enables the utilisation and accumulation of other types of capital which may contribute to educational success.

The chapter will begin with the stories of Lucy and Lydia. These stories allow for a more holistic, rather than a thematic, approach to understanding how the notion of support plays out for individuals within their familial environment. The stories presented here also chime with the themes offered in the following chapters, but I have selected them to sit here because they represent this theme well. Following the stories, I offer an analysis of the three

elements of support prevalent *across* the stories these first-generation students told. Firstly, I will consider how parents positioned education as an important practice which would lead to better future opportunities than they had experienced. Subsequently, the students took on this perspective and saw their parents as reverse role models, beginning to see education as a route to a more enriching and prosperous trajectory. Secondly, I will explore the explicit actions by parents that demonstrate an interest in the formal school structures and the implicit nurturing actions which are important where discipline-specific knowledge is unavailable. Finally, I will explore how engagement with books and reading practices was widespread in the family home. Consequently, I argue that encouragement to engage in these practices and others supports the development of an inquisitive mind, which may be crucial for successful educational progression. I will conclude that these three forms of support inherent in the parent-child relationship may be a crucial foundation on which progression into and through higher education is built.

5.1. Lucy's Story: "She won't be working in a factory."

Lucy is a PhD candidate with a traditional progression through primary, secondary, and further education. However, her progression through higher education was in response to the needs of her industry. Lucy is female, aged between 31 – 35 years at the time of the interview and is of a White – British ethnic background. The story that follows offers insight into the explicit nature of the family support that Lucy received in her educational endeavours. Despite university not being part of their academic trajectory, her parents and grandparents valued education highly and encouraged her to progress into higher education. Through the facilitative home environment, Lucy could invest her capital into her education despite lacking confidence in her abilities.

Lucy grew up in an ex-council house on the edge of a council estate in a rural area. She lived with her mother, father, and younger sister but spent time with her grandparents who lived down the road. Lucy's mother left school without qualifications and became a sewing machinist in the local factory. When Lucy finished her degree, her mother returned to college to train as a nursery nurse. Lucy's father got his O Levels and then commenced an apprenticeship, but he had to give this up due to family circumstances. When Lucy was in her early teens, he went back to college to train to be a mechanical engineer and has worked in local factories doing this since. Lucy's sister did not do well in school

because she was bullied but went on to college to become a hairdresser; she struggled to commit to work due to her health struggles and is now a stay-at-home mother.

Lucy found primary school “a really positive experience” because it was “unstructured” and she could express herself creatively. She particularly enjoyed learning that was more “hands-on,” like science and geography, and had a passion for English due to her grandparents encouraging her to read. Reading practices were also promoted at school, and Lucy was “praised at school” for her high “reading ability” and encouraged to read more advanced books. Lucy’s grandmother helped her with homework and reading regularly; her parents did when they had time. Lucy struggled with Maths and would put pressure on herself when she found it challenging. Lucy’s parents had grand expectations of her academically and often told Lucy that they wished they had gone to university when they were her age. When visiting her mother’s workplace one time, Lucy’s mother told her colleagues that “she’s doing well at school you know, she won’t be working in a factory when she gets older.”

Lucy found the transition to secondary school “scary” as she was separated from her friends. As a “shy” and “introverted” child, she “didn’t make friends easily,” impacting her participation in the new school. Lucy eventually moved back with her friends and she came on “leaps and bounds” as her “confidence” increased. Lucy’s interest in subjects remained as it had at primary school, but she “refused to do PE” because she was “self-conscious” and had unbranded trainers; her parents “wouldn’t have been able to afford Nike.” Lucy tended to study alone because her friends were not “studying oriented,” and she was often called a “swot” by her friends. Although Lucy’s parents could not help much with her homework, she talked to them about it, and they bought her a computer and encyclopaedia software which she found “amazing”; this meant that Lucy could learn by herself.

Lucy was the only one in her friendship group to stay and do A Levels; her friends either went into local apprenticeships or straight into work. She enjoyed the environment as her teachers “were always very encouraging,” and she obtained high marks. Lucy’s parents encouraged her to apply to university, and in class, her teacher encouraged her to attend a scheme for people who had “come from a

non-traditional background” to help her navigate the process; Lucy found this “cringeworthy” but found the sessions “informative.” Her parents were supportive during the application process and went with her to university open days. However, Lucy knew they could not offer her much practical help with the application. Lucy was accepted onto a course at university but decided “to have a gap year” as she “wasn’t really sure” of her course choice and was daunted by the debt implications – she knew that she “couldn’t ask for help in terms of the finance side of things” from her parents. Lucy got experience working with children and then went to university to study for a related degree a year later.

Lucy remained living at home during university because it “kept the cost down” and she worked three part-time jobs. Her father ensured that she had a decent desk and chair to work from, and her parents always showed interest when she was waiting for assignment results. Lucy found the independent study aspect of university easy because she “did that anyway” and it opened her “mind to new ways of thinking.” She was comfortable asking tutors for help but preferred working independently. Lucy was often surprised when she got good marks as she still saw herself as “Lucy from the estate” and sometimes doubted her abilities. She did struggle with the social side, and although she made new friends, she lost touch with many over time.

Lucy did not have a career plan when she finished her undergraduate degree; she knew she was interested in teaching but was unsure of her next steps. Lucy took a full-time job as a nursery assistant and quickly moved on to work with the local authority, where she was offered further professional training. Here, Lucy was approached by a colleague who asked “Have you ever thought about teaching adults?” So she taught a few sessions in a local college and eventually she was offered a permanent post. Lucy then returned to university for a PGCE and a master’s degree, she studied for “whatever the industry requirement’s been.” She struggled with the master’s degree because her mother became ill, and she needed to help care for her. Although she did not feel fully committed to the master’s degree because of her mother’s health, she pushed this through to completion. After completing the master’s, Lucy applied for a job teaching in universities to “see what happened,” and she was “flabbergasted” when she was accepted.

Lucy's progression to a PhD was like the PGCE and master's degree, primarily based on doing what needed to be done to progress in her field. She knew the standard for those teaching in universities was to have a PhD, so it felt like the next logical step. Lucy also felt it was "a personal ambition" to get to this level of study because it was "about doing your best at something."

5.2. Lydia's Story: "I don't wanna be buttering sandwiches."

Lydia is a PhD candidate who progressed through primary, secondary, further, and higher education without any breaks in her learning. Lydia is female, aged between 21 – 25 years at the time of the interview, and has a White – British ethnic background. The following story offers insight into how Lydia navigated her educational journey through several supportive relationships that enabled her to access and invest in the capital at her disposal. It highlights how several minor critical moments arose through these relationships, enabling her to participate and enter higher education despite her apprehensions about not being from an educated family.

Lydia lived with her mother, father, and older brother growing up. Her mother left school wanting to work in a nursery but never undertook the training and since then has worked in a café. Her father left school and went into an apprenticeship; he did a course in plumbing at the same time. Lydia's brother left school going to do a joinery apprenticeship but soon left because he did not enjoy it - he now works in a supermarket. Lydia had a "close family," with not much extended family nearby. She lived in a "nice house," but her family did not have "money to throw around." They could afford to do things as a family, but it meant her father was working a lot of overtime.

Lydia enjoyed primary school and mostly characterised this through the social aspects. She was the "class clown" and felt the most confident when doing subjects that she enjoyed. Lydia was an "average or below" pupil and wanted to be more like her friend, who always got top marks; instead, she tended to follow her less studious friends. Lydia's cousin was in the same school year as her, so when she found out her cousin would be going to a fee-paying grammar school,

Lydia felt that her cousin was much cleverer than her, which was exacerbated by her father drawing behavioural comparisons between them. Lydia's parents always attended parents' evenings, and her father was "very strict" but "more bothered" about "being respectful and behaving, rather than being the best in the class."

Lydia found the transition to secondary school difficult, both socially and academically. She struggled to find friends with whom she fitted in and did not enjoy or understand many of her subjects. She clashed with teachers because she "wasn't open-minded about anything," and if they disagreed, she became disinterested. Lydia perceived her peers as much cleverer than her, so she misbehaved to "protect" herself from the "embarrassment" of trying and failing. Halfway through secondary school, Lydia was moved into higher academic sets with peers she considered "smart" and were "willing to learn." Here she began to pick up a stronger work ethic and put in more effort. This was furthered because her father encouraged her to focus on gaining GCSE qualifications as these were the "footsteps of doing better" in life so that she did not have to struggle in the future as her parents had. This made her realise she did not want to end up in a job she disliked like her mother; "I don't wanna be like my mum, I don't wanna be buttering sandwiches."

Lydia decided she would stay on to sixth form to do A Levels and chose subjects that she enjoyed and where she knew she liked the teacher. However, she "really struggled with A Levels" and reverted to old habits of not turning up and not trying. Lydia felt that she nearly failed her AS Levels because she was "baffled" by new ways of thinking and theorising. Her teachers pulled her aside and told her "I'm not giving up on you" because her lack of confidence was the only thing getting in her way. This encouragement helped Lydia realise that she needed to work harder to avoid working in a supermarket like her brother. She pulled her "thumb out" and did raise her overall grade but regretted not putting in the effort sooner.

University was not something that Lydia had ever considered; "I'm not clever enough for uni, there's no chance." In the last year of sixth form, a university lecturer did a session to advertise their course, and Lydia was especially interested in this subject. After going to a university open day with her mother,

she applied to the course at the last minute, putting all her “eggs in one basket” and thinking she had “nothing to lose.” Lydia knew her cousin was applying to university, so she did not want to miss out. Starting university, Lydia was keen not to repeat earlier experiences, so she put in 100% effort to see what she could achieve. Lydia continued to assess her ability against others, feeling less capable than her friends studying more “academic” subjects whilst competing with those on her course for top marks. Regardless of the outcome, Lydia tried her “best” and became less “humiliated or embarrassed” by the possibility of getting a bad grade.

Lydia focused and adapted to the unfamiliar environment by using the university’s support services and seeking help with areas she struggled with. Lydia remained living at home during university, and whilst her parents were supportive - bringing her tea and biscuits when she was writing assignments - she did not feel that she could discuss the “stresses of life” with her parents. This became more prominent during the doctoral study because arguments had arisen when she tried to communicate the pressure she felt, driven by her parents’ frustrations about her not having a wage coming in.

During her undergraduate degree, Lydia wanted to be a schoolteacher, but this shifted towards university teaching as she felt university students were more interested in learning. Lydia had “never been shy” but “had never been confident in front of people” at university because she did not “speak academically smart” and was not particularly good at getting her thoughts across. Her lecturers considerably influenced Lydia’s application for a PhD as they told her about the option for a fee waiver and encouraged her that it was something she could do. Lydia found it another big academic jump, struggling with the new terminology and statistics. Lydia overcame this by seeking support from her supervisors and now has a part-time teaching position where she helps undergraduate students with the difficult transitions she experienced.

5.3. Exploring the Notion of Support

In the following sections, I will consider how the notion of familial ‘support’ prevailed as a key contributing factor for the successful navigation of and participation in the educational

environment. It is an established finding that parental engagement is key to children's success (Fischer et al., 2019) and that the family significantly shapes expectations and support for higher education (Burke, 2016). As highlighted in Chapter Three, research has begun to understand how first-generation students can be successful because of their home environment rather than despite it (Gofen, 2009; O'Shea, 2015). The argument I offer here provides support for these earlier findings, and I will contribute to this discussion by arguing that family support is a mechanism that enables success in the educational environment on three levels: 1) clear communication of the value of education, 2) showing interest and involvement in school-life, and 3) providing an environment which is conducive to learning. Further, the social capital inherent in these supportive familial relationships mobilises and reveals the potential for acquiring other types of capital valued in the educational environment. Therefore, I argue that support enables the utilisation and accumulation of the types of capital which may contribute to educational success.

5.3.1. Positively Valuing Education

One of the most influential aspects of support was that parents positively valued education, and they communicated this definitively to their children. Firstly, this sub-section captures the hopes and dreams parents were said to hold for their children and how these seemed to be explicitly tied to educational progression. More specifically, parents communicated that education was the route to better opportunities than they had experienced themselves. Subsequently, this sub-section highlights how these students came to understand their own aspirations through this communication; they saw their parents as reverse role models and as motivation for increasing opportunities for their future selves.

Seeing Education as the Route to a Better Future

In the interviews, participants spoke about how their parents linked working hard in school to the best route to freedom of choice in the future. As presented earlier in Lydia's story, this was demonstrated through the way that her father encouraged her to work hard so that she "*opened the doors*" to better opportunities in the future, and Aaron (26-30, Male, White) offered a similar account with his father telling him to "*work as hard as you can now in whatever it is you do, and it'll pay dividends later on in life*". For some, their parents communicated how engaging with something now, even if they do not enjoy it, will pay off later in life. This was highlighted when David stated:

I think there was more of an image of, yeah, education's important, that's probably the best thing that my mum taught us, that mess around, do what you're doing, but still, you gotta make sure you do your education to allow you if you decide to change

in the future what you wanna do, it gives you, it kinda ticks some of the boxes so at least you're slowly progressing forward – David (26-30, Male, White)

In this quote, David highlights how his mother was a crucial influence in prioritising education whilst balancing other potential interests. His mother recognised that education provided the foundation for future advancement and flexibility, which she communicated clearly to her children. In addition, parents were said to draw on their own life experiences to reiterate the importance of education and the implications for future opportunities. Thomas reflected on his father's candidness about this:

My dad always made it very clear to me that he only ever got his GCSEs and he didn't do well in his GCSEs because he messed about so, and he were always dead honest with me and says, "Every time I go for a job" he says "I've got to lie about my GCSEs and I'm just really lucky that no one's ever checked", so he always made sure that I was never going to have to lie about my qualifications, I was going to have plenty of qualifications because that gives me all the freedom in the world to do what I want to do – Thomas (21-25, Male, White)

Thomas's father did not hide how his school experience led to poor qualifications. Instead, he used it as a vignette that allowed Thomas to reinvent his trajectory in relation to his father's experience. His father recognised the importance of qualifications for future opportunities and seemed committed to ensuring that Thomas did not face the same challenges he had. Similar notions of missed opportunities were echoed by others, such as Tara (21-25, Female, White), who spoke about why her mother always pushed her to do well in her educational pursuits; *"I think my mum kind of regretted what she'd done, and she was kind of pushing me to do what she wished she'd done when she was younger."* These discourses that education was a valuable resource to be engaged with were present in almost all the participant stories. Not only was it positioned as something valuable to participate in, but also as something which could lead to better opportunities in the future.

This link between qualifications and better job opportunities was made more explicit within discussions about how the university was portrayed in the family. Several participants noted that university was portrayed as the best route to shift away from the generational tendency to engage in lower-skilled, lower-paid work and instead towards a future that their parents had not had the opportunity to pursue themselves due to their socioeconomic position and the earlier exclusivity of higher education. Brittany reflected on how her parent's socioeconomic position impacted their opportunities, yet they still valued progression into higher education:

From a socioeconomic perspective, my grandma couldn't do hairdressing because her parents didn't have the money, my grandad went and did several jobs because he needed the money, university was never ever going to be an option then,

obviously my parents didn't go because it wasn't really the done thing ... they valued it because it's so radically different to anything they'd ever had and they knew what it meant in terms of salary and wages at the finish in their eyes, you know, typically people who have gone to uni in their generation were high flyers – Brittany (21-25, Female, White)

The mention of previous generations and the economic and cultural constraints they experienced meant that university was unattainable due to the prevailing circumstances. However, Brittany's comments highlighted that despite university being something so "radically different" to that experienced by her parents and grandparents, they positioned the university as a symbol of prestige and financial security that had not previously been experienced in the family. Further, encapsulated in Lucy's story presented at the beginning of this chapter was a narrative that demonstrated a long-standing and positive valuing of education by her parents. In particular, she discussed how her parents had communicated this because they wanted her to have better opportunities than they had and avoid getting "stuck" in low-skilled and low-paid work as they had been. Lucy stated that:

I remember her [mother] saying to the girls in the factory once, "Oh, this is Lucy, this is my daughter Lucy," and just introducing me to everybody and then her saying, "Lucy won't be working here, Lucy won't work here, you know she's doing well at school, you know she won't be working in a factory when she gets older" ... he [father] wishes that he'd have done more and completed more so I suppose they saw that by encouraging me and placing that high value on education that it, do you know what I mean, that'd be a good thing and I would be able to do what I wanted to do and I wouldn't be stuck like they felt at the time – Lucy (31-35, Female, White)

This scenario recalled by Lucy illustrates her mother's high aspirations for her future and recognises Lucy's academic achievements as the route to pursuing a different path. Similar notions, highlighted here by quotes from Brittany and Lucy, were evident in many of the stories presented by the participants. Based on the narratives shared in interviews, it seems that many parents recognised and communicated that more opportunities were available for their children than previously for someone from their background. The massification of higher education has enabled higher education to be an option for a larger proportion of the population, and parents of current generations have considered this a possibility for their first-generation children. The way participants portray their parents as encouraging education as a means to a successful future could suggest that parents place their trust in a 'meritocratic' education system. Whilst parents were not directly featured in this research, these findings reflect those of Rondini (2016), who found similar discourses throughout the parent-child familial narratives. The quotes above highlight how previous generations have aspired to do more than their trajectory allowed. Still, it is crucial that the turning point of the widening participation agenda has now allowed some to turn that aspiration into action. This

echoes research by O'Shea et al. (2016), who similarly noted how parents strategically positioned a university education as a possibility that could lead to better opportunities in the future.

Such possibilities of higher education start to become realised because of the explicit dialogue woven through the family environment. As highlighted in this sub-section, this dialogue is centred upon promoting education as the route to a prosperous future and, in many cases, a future that is imbued with more opportunities than their parents had experienced. Patfield et al. (2021) argue that this is crucial as a means of social mobility where cultural capital in the form of a degree is absent. The way that parents explicitly convey these possibilities is unlike that of middle-class families, where the expectation is implicit, and that pathway is seen as a normal part of life (Reay et al., 2005; Whitty et al., 2015). As such, I suggest that parents of first-generation students may recognise and communicate the value of obtaining the cultural capital that comes with formal qualifications to improve their children's future opportunities. Consequently, the social capital present in the parent-child relationship translates into ambition for new trajectories and paves the way for potential future progression into higher education. Therefore, family support and its inherent social capital enable access to other forms of capital that can potentially impact educational trajectories.

Viewing Parents as Reverse Role Models

For this potential future progression into higher education to be realised and activated, it seemed that there was a need to adopt their parents' perspective on education so that they could reflect on the broader opportunities and possibilities beyond the current socioeconomic position of their family environment. Such reflections on their parents' struggles and missed opportunities often led these first-generation students to aspire to different futures. For some, this was thought about in relation to the levels of economic capital in the family and how engaging in education could help prevent them from struggling financially in similar ways. For example, Brittany (21-25, Female, White) stated, "*I've always been aware that I don't want to end up scraping the bottom of the barrel; I've seen my parents go through financial difficulty, so if I can avoid that it's alright*", but for others, this was expressed in terms of a desire to lead a more fulfilling life, as Lydia said:

I didn't want to be like my mum and be struggling and almost regretting not taking the chances in terms of education and fulfilling stuff like that, to be able to do things that I could potentially be good at and do better in life. So, I think that's not her actual experience influenced me, but not wanting to be like her ... I don't wanna be buttering sandwiches, not that there's anything wrong with that, but I know she

doesn't enjoy it or it's not something that she had an idea of doing back when she was whatever age – Lydia (21-25, Female, White)

This narrative presented by Lydia refers to her mother's history of part-time work and how her aspirations were, in some ways, constructed through her mother's experiences. Lydia highlighted how parents communicated their dissatisfaction with their jobs - struggle, regret, missed opportunities – and that their children could, and should, get more from their employment and other life opportunities. These were narratives of betterment and improvement. This seems an essential mechanism for those whose parents are not content with their employment in enabling their children's participation in education. Similarly, George discussed how his aspirations were based on ensuring he reaped the benefits of his hard work, unlike his parents. He spoke about his parents being pub landlords for many years, so they lived *"in a big house with a big garden"* and had *"a cleaner ... and we had a gardener,"* which meant that when he was young, he felt like they had a *"nice lifestyle."* As George got older, though, he understood how his parents were *"very working class in their background,"* and when discussing his motivations for going to university, George stated:

It was definitely more appealing than getting a crap job. I suppose I had high expectations of myself, and I probably saw my parents work really hard all their life for very little reward. and they had like a nice lifestyle for a period, but then they end up getting too old for that and have nothing to show for it – George (36-40, Male, White)

This narrative is similar to Lydia's in that his parents' experiences mediated George's aspirations. This process is about understanding what they do not want to do or be in relation to their parents, and this starts to frame education as a means of avoiding the same ends. This was further illustrated by Annie (41-45, Female, White), who spoke about coming to *"a fork in the road,"* where she realised she was following a similar career path as her mother had. Her motivation for making positive educational decisions was influenced by not wanting to be like her mother: *"Am I going to be this frustrated mother that doesn't give a shit because all her dreams never came to fruition, and I end up bookkeeping in a bloody garage somewhere? And I was like, I cannot let this happen."* This suggests that these first-generation students perceived that the economic and cultural capital possessed by their parents was not conducive to a secure or fruitful future (in terms of financial stability and job satisfaction), leading them to aspire to find better opportunities through participating in education. For those with a family history of higher education, aspirations could also be constructed around parental experiences. However, it may be more about aspiring for similar occupations and educational trajectories rather than in opposition to them (Irwin & Elley, 2013).

For some, the wider social and economic struggles of the communities they grew up in meant that strong educational values were not prevalent beyond their family – consequently, this parent-child relationship was even more important. The struggles in the local area meant that there were fewer people they could look up to as positive role models, so the positive narratives about education in the home were important. For example, Joseph (26-30, Male, Black – Caribbean) spoke about how, despite the troubles in the local area, his mother always encouraged education; *“she really told us to do well and get our grades.”* Furthermore, David (26-30, Male, White) summarised that this was *“the best thing that my mum taught us.”* However, it was also reflecting on their family and community environment that helped them consider what they wanted or did not want their lives to become. David spoke about this extensively:

There was definitely a bit of an image of what to do, how do you become successful when no one around you was successful? When everybody just has an easy life, where they're either living on benefits or, erm, they commit crime to make money ... you weren't really looking up to your parents thinking oh I wanna be like that cos it was always a struggle, the people you're looking up to are those that are kind of bad role models, the people who literally, people who are, like, gangsters so got the expensive cars, and you know are involved in dodgy things – David (26-30, Male, White)

David further went on to speak about a moment that led him to move away from an environment he found suffocating:

I remember thinking, at a certain point, feeling quite suffocated in that town, whereas everyone else, even now, they're still there. They just bought a house, and they still continue to live in that area near their parents and have had kids, and a lot of them are probably single parents themselves now, having kids early and kind of repeating the cycle of poverty, and I remember thinking at a certain point probably like late teenage years that that's not what I want for myself – David (26-30, Male, White)

This type of avoidance of certain behaviours (such as offending) echoed research by MacDonald and Marsh (2005, p. 123), who argued that those from deprived communities sometimes took inspiration from *not* wanting to follow the same route as their parents through a *“reverse role model effect.”* In other words, counter to negative stereotypes of a self-perpetuating underclass, young people resisted taking paths that they thought might lead to the sorts of hard and impoverished lives lived by their parents. This notion of the reverse role model can be furthered and applied in the context of first-generation students' aspirations for higher education. This process combines a reflection on their familial experiences of hardship and 'missed opportunities' with their own experience of that environment, resulting in aspirations for better future opportunities than their parents had. These aspirations work to enable planning and to see the potential for a different and more

fulfilling future. Thereby, the experiences and positive support of the family act as a mechanism of motivation and encouragement, enabling progression towards higher education enrolment (Reyes, 2012). Given that this mechanism is only triggered in some individuals (i.e., those who go on to university), it could be that parents must 'give permission' by encouraging their children to achieve more academically and professionally than they did themselves. This suggests that the mere presence of role models is perhaps insufficient, and something more is needed.

Section Summary

The social capital available through the parent-child relationship proves crucial in shaping aspirations. Aspiring not to be like their parents could be just as powerful as aspiring to be like them, and through the communication of the value of education, young people begin to see the potential of their agency in pursuing different outcomes. Indeed, first-generation students may enact *more* agency than those for whom progression to university is seen as a natural part of their trajectory. Their parents did not go to university due to the lack of places available or because they could not see themselves as students in this way. However, the widening participation agenda has provided the places and cultural scripts that allow pre-existent positive attitudes to education to be realised. This raises questions about governmental perspectives, which argue that the poverty of aspiration holds back those from less privileged backgrounds and, therefore, need to have their aspirations raised from outside the family (Roberts & Atherton, 2011).

5.3.2. Maintaining an Interest and Involvement in School Life

As outlined above, parents needed to *voice* their support for education. Still, a further aspect of this support was that parents (and other caregivers) *showed* an interest and were actively involved in their children's educational development through their actions. Firstly, this subsection captures the actions of key family members when interacting with school-based structures such as homework, parents' evenings, and the curriculum. Secondly, this subsection highlights the less tangible and emotional acts of parents where they cannot provide discipline-specific guidance. These simple day-to-day acts seem to constitute an important part of a supportive family environment.

Interacting with School Structures

It was commonplace amongst the participants that they perceived their parents as regularly engaging with the aspects of education imposed by the school structure, such as parents'

evenings and homework. For example, Chloe discussed how her parents always attended parents' evenings and suggested that this practice was just something that parents did:

Both of them, every time, even though I was like, "Can we not?" Just on the way in the car home, then, they'd be like, "That was good, wasn't it? There's nothing unexpected" It was more that they'd go because it was parents' evening, and they were parents; it wasn't because there was any concerns or anything. They were like, "Just a nice update, you're doing well; we thought you were, but nice to hear from the teachers" – Chloe (21-25, Female, White)

This highlights how Chloe's parents attended parents' evenings not because there were any concerns but because it was expected of them, as parents, to engage with their child's education. It reflects an understanding of parents' evenings as a means of staying informed about Chloe's progression and maintaining relationships with teachers. Similar attitudes were echoed across the sample; for example, Mike (26-30, Male, White) spoke about how his parents took parents' evenings seriously: *"They'd go there, you know, they'd take it seriously, feedback from the teachers and that... I do remember walking in dressed all smart, and it was kind of a serious thing at the time."* Similarly, engagement with homework was presented as an everyday and important activity. Rachel discussed how her grandmother was a key caregiver who ensured that Rachel had completed her homework before she was allowed to engage in social activities:

She [grandmother] like basically like raised me essentially, my mum was at work, yeah we used to have really big arguments about like doing my homework because I'd want to leave it, and she was like, "No, you come home and have your tea and do your homework straight away." So yeah, she was more like the enforcer of the homework – Rachel (21-25, Female, White)

Furthermore, Katie spoke about how her mother ensured she completed her homework activities despite the panic and pressure Katie felt about it:

I do remember when we used to get, in year six, we used to get a mental arithmetic test every Friday night, and my mum used to sit me down and be like, "Just do it, get it out of the way" - Katie (26-30, Female, White)

How parents' evenings and homework are discussed here was representative of my sample more widely in that it was commonplace for caregivers to take an interest in the activities that the school expected. The presence of key family members in school life further positions education as something valued within the family environment and encourages participation. Although participation in these activities was perceived as something that was expected – as highlighted when Chloe stated, *"they'd go because it was parents evening, and they were parents"* – these actions by parents demonstrated a commitment to school life and situated education as something on offer.

In addition, some parents went beyond the specific activities expected by the school and had an active involvement in developing skills and promoting academic achievement. This was demonstrated through how parents provided additional help outside the school with subjects their children found difficult. This was highlighted in the following quote from Tina:

Anything that we were sort of struggling with, so for me, it was my maths, there'd be, like, in the kitchen we have an entire wall free and, like, all my maths homework I'd be struggling with, like, there'd be equations and stuff on the wall, and she'd [mother] be like, "right, while I'm chopping this onion, you do that equation" sort of thing and like the time's tables were printed out and stuck up – Tina (26-30, Female, White)

Similarly, Nigel (41-45, Male, White) described how his father would engage with him at bedtime: *"he used to sit on the end of my bed, and he would say "What's nine times nine?" and he'd kind of fire things at me."* Both scenarios described by Tina and Nigel suggest acts that form part of their everyday interactions with their parents whilst cooking dinner or during a bedtime routine. This type of involvement from parents allowed for engagement with educational activities outside of the school environment, enabling their children to participate more fully in their academic progression. Indeed, these implicit expectations, which are inculcated through day-to-day activities, seem to be an important mechanism of capital. Furthermore, having interested and involved parents (and other key caregivers) outside of school helped these prospective first-generation students position themselves as someone who could achieve academically, which was promoted through additional work. Rachel (21-25, Female, White) highlighted this when she said, *"I really struggled with spelling and maths, so my grandma made sure I did more of that than anything else just so I knew, so I could improve on it"*, and Tara further described her engagement with additional work:

In reception and maybe year one or year two and my mum used to say, "You don't want to be on the Dougie Diggers table" because all the tables used to get names, and the Dougie Diggers table used to be like ... the lower end of the academic scale and my mum used to be like, "You don't want to be on the Dougie Diggers table" so I used to always be like doing work at home, like, my grandma would buy me like workbook things with questions in, like, practice whatever so yeah I used to do them at home to make sure I wasn't at the Dougie Diggers table – Tara (21-25, Female, White)

What stood out here was her mother's advice about avoiding being on *"the lower end of the academic scale,"* coupled with her grandmother buying additional workbooks, which meant that Tara adopted a similar perspective as her mother – fundamentally that participating in additional work would mean she would be *higher up* the academic scale. As a result, Tara's extra effort was driven by her desire to avoid the label associated with lower ability and, thus, to excel academically. This provided a key message within the family environment: hard work could result in academic achievement. Though not directly in the context of progression

into higher education, this array of small and large supportive actions by caregivers was important for engaging with educational structures, building aspirations, and mobilising the potential acquisition of the types of capital valued in higher education.

Maintaining an Emotional Involvement

When discussing the notion of support with my participants, they tended to initially offer statements that suggested they did not have much support from their parents throughout the educational journey. This tendency offered an insight into the complexities of having parents who generally supported education but did not have specific knowledge of the subjects at hand. This was particularly significant in later schooling (GCSE and A Level) when the content became more specialised and, in some cases, was at a level that parents had not obtained. It seemed important to begin to unravel these complexities to understand more fully what support means to these participants and whether it is labelled as such by the people getting it.

Joseph (26-30, Male, Black – Caribbean) spoke about how his mother had encouraged him to work hard and do well in school before going on to say, “*But I think she couldn’t really help us at that level, I mean, she’d always say to me, and she keeps saying to me now “I’m not good at English, I’m not good at maths” and that*”. Katie also spoke about how her parents were not able to help her understand the subject content:

They [parents] obviously supported but not really; I guess they didn’t necessarily know the content of what we were doing as in to test me and things, I don’t know; I used to ask my dad to ask my questions off my cue cards, he used to help me with stuff like that ... they kind of just left me to it I mean they’ve always been supportive like talked to me if I need to but regards like content, they weren’t able to like help me understand things if I didn’t understand it. – Katie (26-30, Female, White)

Katie discussed how her parents did not know the content of what she was learning and, therefore, could not help her to understand it. However, she also referred to times when her father asked her questions and talked to her about certain aspects of her work. This suggests that supportive acts are taking place but are only sometimes recognised specifically as support by those receiving it. Parents seemed willing to offer help in the areas they felt able to but were perceived as being less equipped to assist with specific aspects of academic work. However, others foregrounded how they experienced lots of support from their parents, even though they could not help with subject-specific knowledge. Sophie defined support in a very specific way:

They [parents] were very supportive, but as soon as I got passed, say, primary school, early stages of high school, they were like, “We can’t really help you with it;

we don't know what you're on about". So they were very supportive in saying, "You need to be getting on with this", "You need to do your revision," "You've got an exam coming up," "Have you sorted your revision out?" "Do you feel confident you can do it?" and everything, they couldn't really offer any help in terms of helping us through it - Sophie (21-25, Female, White)

This narrative from Sophie highlighted the importance of parents remaining involved in school life, even when they could not help with specific knowledge acquisition. For Sophie, the way her parents ensured she was engaged with her revision and exams constituted an important aspect of the support she received. Furthermore, the way Sophie recalled her parents asking if she felt "*confident*" in what she was doing suggests that her parents had an emotional, as well as instrumental, investment in her education and this emotional aspect was further demonstrated when Brittany stated:

The content they [parents] didn't have as much of an understanding of, but they could understand when you're struggling and when you're not, so there's still that same support even if they don't understand exactly what you're doing – Brittany (21-25, Female, White)

In Chapter Two, I argued that the notion of emotional capital can be used to explore the mechanisms of social capital in nuanced ways. Reay (2000) argued that emotional capital is a resource that can be invested in others, relating particularly to the relationship between mother and child. However, how Katie, Sophie, and Brittany spoke of the emotional aspects of their supportive relationships illustrated that *both fathers and mothers* were intrinsic in the investment of emotional capital. The notions expressed by these first-generation students around talking about concerns, checking they felt confident, and understanding when they were struggling all formed a crucial part of the prevailing emotional capital that remained even once the parents could not provide more instrumental support (such as the subject knowledge). This "attention, care, and concern" (Allatt, 1993, p143) seems to be perceived by these first-generation students as a crucial aspect of support as they progress through education. Sophie further described how she felt "*encouraged*" and "*recognised*" by her parents for academic achievement. This demonstrates how Sophie perceived her parents as committed to her achievement by encouraging her to get involved and praising her for it. Her parents showed interest and active investment in her academic progression through the emotional resource of recognition. Even though the rewards were often small and did not require great amounts of economic capital, these were identified as tokens of recognition:

We got lots of certificates for things which my mum and dad always encouraged to be fair; they'd do things like they'd take us out and let us pick a bag of sweets or something. It was only something small, but it was something to say that we've been recognised for doing well and to keep on going; they'd always want us to get involved – Sophie (21-25, Female, White)

Section Summary

The small and large acts of parental involvement and interest demonstrated in this sub-section helped create an atmosphere of a commitment to learning. Jeynes (2005, p. 262) argues that this “educationally oriented ambience” created by parents provides their children with an understanding of the available support and establishes a certain expectation in the child’s mind. As Watkins (2018, p. 1244) argues, their educational outcomes may be connected to how these “relations were configured within the spaces of their everyday lives” and the extent to which they had “embodied a familiarity for scholarly labour within the home.” The acts that constituted an extension of the school context, whilst not expressed as particularly influential by the participants, were commonplace in these home environments. Furthermore, it seems that parents provided space for instrumental learning through everyday activities and emotional resources instead of assistance with higher-level academic knowledge. These important actions demonstrated an interest and involvement in their child’s scholarly progression, with the significance of educational engagement being communicated through seemingly trivial day-to-day interactions.

5.3.3. Providing a Facilitative Learning Environment

The third aspect of support explored in this chapter denotes how the family provided an environment conducive to extracurricular learning. This sub-section captures how books and reading practices were encouraged in the home as a means of enjoyment and self-improvement. Subsequently, this sub-section captures how engagement with books and other extracurricular activities was key to developing an inquisitive mind. This form of support enabled these first-generation students to connect their interests with their potential future pursuit of education.

Engaging with Books and Reading Practices

Throughout the interviews, there was plenty of discussion about engagement in activities outside of school (e.g., hobbies, holidays, excursions); there was, however, little commonality in the types and frequency of activities that were engaged in. Most had a holiday each year in the UK, with a handful having holidays abroad. Many spent their leisure time socialising with friends, watching TV, or listening to music, whilst some participated in organised sports or music practices. Some went on family trips to the cinema, museums, or hiking, whereas others mainly recalled individual activities at home (e.g., playing games and watching TV). There was also variation in the frequency of these activities, from occasional or even one-offs to being a regular part of family life. This suggests that these first-

generation students do not access *specific* forms of cultural capital (in the Bourdieusian sense). Instead, their cultural activities and engagements were unremarkable and seemed quite typical of many children and young people in the UK. That is, except for one thing: books.

The most significant dimension of the home being a facilitative learning environment mentioned by virtually all those interviewed had to do with books and reading. Having books in the house and engaging in regular reading practices was commonplace in their family environments. The number of books in the home has been strongly correlated with positive educational outcomes, particularly with increased literacy and numeracy skills in later life; the greater the number of books in the home, the stronger the apparent effect (Evans et al., 2010; Thomson, 2018). This effect is especially true for those from less privileged backgrounds, with each additional book owned having a positive impact on test scores (Sikora et al., 2019). Furthermore, it has been found that the number of books and reading practices in the home can mediate the influence of parental education level and socioeconomic status on educational progression (Evans et al., 2010; Sullivan & Brown, 2015). These studies suggest a positive correlation between the number of books in the home and educational achievement, which seems to be confirmed by my own research. However, I will contribute to and extend this discussion by exploring the literary practices evident in the narratives of these first-generation students and how these practices may be a fundamental aspect of their educational success.

It was apparent that books were abundant in many of these home environments. Books were not merely seen as passive objects but as something to be actively engaged with, which was also fostered by parents. Annie (41-45, Female, White) spoke about her mother as being an *“avid reader”* and explained that she felt that is why she also became the same. Annie described how her house was *“always full of books, books everywhere, the coffee table was made of books, in my living room, books, books, books,”* highlighting her mother’s reading habits and their profound effect on Annie. In a Bourdieusian sense, books can be understood as a form of objectified cultural capital easily transferred from parents to children. However, for a child to consume them in a culturally appropriate way relies on cultural capital in the embodied state. Annie’s description conjures a vivid image of her living space as being imbued with the presence of books, not only as physical objects but as a way of being. This stark presence of books in her family home meant that reading became an embodied practice for Annie.

It was not only the act of observation that shaped their reading habits but also the act of communication. In other words, books were not just present and visible in the home, but they

were presented as things to be actively engaged with. The intrinsic value of reading was conveyed through how they were encouraged to engage with books, with parents and grandparents playing a pivotal role here. This encouragement to read was not done for its potential for scholarly achievements or academic advancement but fundamentally for the inherent goodness and enjoyment it brings to one's life. Like Annie, Joanna spoke about how her family's home was full of books. However, Joanna demonstrated her father's perspective on the essence of reading; it is not to acquire the skill of reading proficiency but as a source of personal fulfilment. Joanna stated:

We had loads and loads and loads of books. Like, my dad loves to read too, and I always remember he said that "I don't want you to read to be good at reading, but it's important for me that you can read for pleasure, to enjoy reading." – Joanna (21-25, Female, White)

Similarly, George discussed how his parents encouraged him to read. George spoke about the deliberate efforts of his parents to spark an interest in reading by buying the types of literature they thought George would be interested in. His father's willingness to provide special edition books beyond his taste showed a commitment to fostering George's interests and imagination, whilst his mother's sharing of childhood favourites created an environment where stories were shared across generations. George stated:

*My dad encouraged me to read, so he bought me like *The Hobbit* when I was about that age, actually, and *The Lord of the Rings* ... I really loved *The Hobbit*, he wasn't into that but thought I would be ... yeah so he definitely encouraged me to read, same with my mum to be fair but probably less enthusiastically. She had loads of books that she read when she was a kid, like *Black Beauty*, which ended up in my bedroom, so there was implicit encouragement there, I'd talk to her about those stories and that, so it was nice. They encouraged me to read, I suppose would be the thing, but it was not for any academic purpose, although it's helpful for that, it was just because it was a good thing to do for enjoyment and pleasure and just general self-improvement – George (36-40, Male, White)*

The narratives offered by Annie, Joanna, and George were common across the sample. The overarching sentiment (as perceived by the participants) was that ambitions for academic achievement or reading proficiency skills did not drive parents' encouragement to read. Those motives were secondary. Instead, the focus was on the personal benefits of reading - the enjoyment and self-improvement that literature can offer. Their parents' engagement with books and communication of the importance of reading practices is harnessed through the bonding social capital of their relationships, which enables them to participate in these practices more fully. This transmission of reading as a valuable practice constitutes a form of cultural capital transfer that encourages exploration beyond the confines of formal education. It has been argued that this type of home socialisation is a critical skill as it cultivates

independent and broad reading habits valued in school contexts (Loh & Sun, 2020). This could be because literacy, in the form of books and reading, is the foundation of the education system in that embracing knowledge through the written word forms a significant aspect of succeeding within it.

This type of reading culture in the home consists of parents reading books but also reading to their children (Sullivan & Brown, 2015). Reading often formed part of daily routines for those interviewed, and they attributed their affection for books to reading experiences facilitated by their family. Some recalled how their parents had played an active role in reading to them as children, demonstrating an investment of time and effort and creating positive associations to literature and reading practices. This also had implications beyond the personal enjoyment aspect of reading and extended into their academic pursuits. For instance, Lucy spoke about her interest in English (as a subject) and connected this to her love of being read to as a child. Lucy emphasised the emotional connection she had with reading, which resonated with her on a personal level but also extended to different stages of her educational journey:

I remember I loved poetry, absolutely loved poetry, even beyond primary school into secondary school. For my GCSE English Literature, I wrote an anthology poetry, absolutely loved it, loved English, like from a very early age, loved being read to; my grandma used to read to me a lot, my mum and dad used to read to me a lot, it was just something that, you know what I mean, like, something that I really, really enjoyed – Lucy (31-35, Female, White)

Like Lucy, Robert also connected the reading practices at home to his educational pursuits. Robert spoke about how he was not particularly good at some of the subjects at school. However, he enjoyed and was always praised for English (as a subject), creative writing, and his reading level. He recalled how his teacher once said he and his friend “*were the only two boys in the class who thought books weren’t for holding the tables up.*” This highlights how Robert had a different view on the purpose of books than his peers, and he attributes this to the reading experiences facilitated by his parents at home:

I think one of the things that reinforces the English thing and the reading is reading was always a big part of, like my mum and dad always read to us, reading to you as a kid; I have very strong memories of having reading like my mum coming in reading stories to us and reading Roald Dahl stories and Enid Blyton stories and things like that, bedtime stories was always something that was a bit of a constant ... that verbal thing was always a big part of it, and I think that probably had quite a big influence – Robert (36-40, Male, White)

Robert refers to “*that verbal thing*” as the verbal communication in his family environment enacted through reading books aloud. This communication with his parents provided an environment which encouraged literary engagement and intellectual exploration, both at

home and in the school context. It also represents a shared cultural experience transmitted via the social network. This emphasises the broader intricate interplay between one's personal interests, family support, and the formal educational field. The importance of the parental relationship is highlighted here in that parents engage their children with practices which enable them to build capital resources which may have proved to be a crucial aspect of their success in higher education. The social capital in their familial relationships reveals books and reading practice, which can be invested into their formal educational progression.

Developing an Inquisitive Mind

In addition to books, Lucy recalled her parents buying her a computer, providing new learning and engagement opportunities. The way Lucy describes this suggests it was a valuable and transformative asset that enabled her to expand her reading material:

I remember them [parents] buying me a computer, and this were, like, amazing getting this computer, and it were, like, you think back now, I mean computers have changed so much, haven't they? But at the time, I got like this encyclopaedia that you get on it and it was like, oh, that was amazing for me. I got this encyclopaedia, and there was all of a sudden more stuff that I could read at my fingertips, so I started to use that to do, like, my science homework and stuff – Lucy (31-35, Female, White)

For Lucy, the most prominent benefit of having a computer was that she could access information and reading material more conveniently and immediately than before. Her parents' decision to invest in this technology meant that Lucy could access new knowledge by reading about it on the encyclopaedia software. Her parents' actions also helped facilitate and support her school life, as she could use it for homework. This constructed an implicit emphasis on intellectual pursuits and explicit access to new experiences.

Books were also the gateway to new interests and experiences. For some, non-fiction books were a way of learning more about the world and further sparked a curiosity for knowledge. Of prominence was the way that parents took an active role in encouraging these interests. This family support - nurturing interests - demonstrated a commitment to their children's growth and development beyond their usual educational practices. Tina spoke about her keen interest in astronomy as a child, noting that she had many books on the subject. Tina went further to describe how she became "pen pals" with astronomers in America:

I had loads and loads of books on, like, astronomy and stuff, so I used to just, like, send letters. I'd just, like, look at who wrote it and at the back, there's the little place of where to get in touch and stuff, so I just sort of wrote to them like, "I really want to do this when I grow up" ... my mum was really active with me so, like, she'd take me to the post office to post all these things, erm, that came out of my pocket money

like, but yeah, she always, and always has had my back. She bought me my first solar system, which is what set it off, so it's her fault, really – Tina (26-30, Female, White)

This narrative from Tina highlights how the support from her mother went beyond mere encouragement and extended to tangible actions that contributed to her learning development. The comment “so it's her fault, really” suggests that she attributes her continued interest in the subject to her mother's active encouragement and support. Tina spoke further about how she aspired to be an astronomer, and when I asked her in the interview if she had known how to become an astronomer, she replied:

Oh, I knew from being 11, like, I've got pen pals! In one of the letters the astronomers sent me from America, he had, like, written down what it is that I needed sort of, what I needed to be looking into when I was starting university and things – Tina (26-30, Female, White)

This quote demonstrates the power of social capital networks for knowledge acquisition. Tina's mother facilitated Tina's pursuit of her interest in astronomy, which resulted in correspondence with astronomers in America. Through this communication, Tina was connected to the idea of university, gaining insider knowledge about the field and the steps she needed to pursue her aspirations of becoming an astronomer. This meant that university became part of a possible educational trajectory for Tina during her early schooling, which she may not have been connected to as early without these events. It was clear that books and reading practices greatly influenced the ensuing events. Similarly, other interviewees presented narratives that described how books connected them to new interests. Annie spoke about how her interest in nuclear fusion arose from reading a book about it at the library. She was determined to pursue her new interest, and she “begged” her mother to take her on a visit to Sellafield (a nuclear site in the UK). Annie stated:

I'd read something in the library about nuclear fusion, and that they were either just opening up, or opened up, Sellafields to the public at the time, and I was like, I'm really into this ... you could go on a coach trip that was about seven hours to get there, and then you'd get two hours tour around Sellafield, and I thought that there'd be like you get a tour by physicists who'd be able to answer all these great questions and of course it wasn't, it was just Janine from the gift shop walking you round, and I was disappointed and came home, but yeah it was one I begged my mum and probably had to do a paper round or something to save some money to pay to go to Sellafields - Annie (41-45, Female, White)

The supportive acts by Annie's mother are more implicitly woven through this quote than in Tina's narrative. However, her mother invested significant time and effort into facilitating this experience for Annie, highlighted by the seven-hour trip to the site. Neither Tina nor Annie pursued these interests in terms of education or employment. Still, these earlier experiences,

which their parents facilitated, enabled them to engage in educational practices beyond the boundaries of school life. These types of activities were often one-offs and were not part of regular practices by parents, unlike the parents of middle-class children, whom Lareau (2011, p. 2) described as controlling and organising their children's experiences through "*concerted cultivation*." This process ensured that their child engaged in abundant extracurricular activities to gain the types of cultural capital deemed valuable for future success. Whilst this was not the case for the participants in this research, it was evident that parents actively promoted and encouraged engagement in their children's interests.

This engagement was encouraged even when there were limited economic capital levels available. Whilst Tina and Annie were encouraged by their parents, their stories suggested that there were economic constraints to the lengths their parents could go to. This was highlighted when they referred to using their "*pocket money*" and doing a "*paper round*" to pay for the activities. Tina was not explicit about the levels of economic capital available in her family, but Annie was. Annie's household income was minimal, and although she seemed blasé about the paper round, it was likely a necessary job that enabled her to go on the trip. For some, parents prioritised valuable experiences despite their financial constraints. Sophie spoke about a school trip and her parents' commitment to enabling her to go:

When I was younger, there was a trip to Normandy to go on to the war fields and craters and all that sort of stuff, and although they couldn't really afford it, my parents said that I was going anyway; my mum worked extra hours at work, put the money aside, and managed to pay for Normandy so I got to go and see all that – Sophie (21-25, Female, White)

This highlights the financial challenges that Sophie's parents faced: they did not have the available economic capital to support this activity. Despite this, her parents recognised the importance and value of this educational experience for Sophie and were committed to enabling her participation. Although they "*couldn't really afford it*", her mother was willing to work extra hours and make sacrifices to support Sophie's learning and development. This prioritisation of the educational trip demonstrates their understanding of the value of education and experiential learning.

Section Summary

These practices enacted in the family environment may be significant for developing an inquisitive mind and advancing educational pursuits for these first-generation students. In Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of differences in practices amongst society, he noted differences in reading practices between the most and least privileged, whereby knowledge was

generally considered a function of wealth because books were costly. Similar trends have been found in other research whereby these practices were more abundant in families in the higher socioeconomic brackets (Loh & Sun, 2020). Bourdieu (1990b) argued that these routine practices constitute a specific habitus vital for engagement with formal education. This type of socialisation through the family habitus contributes to familiarity with school-valued attributes, which are most commonly associated with middle-class families (Loh & Sun, 2020). As a group, first-generation students are considered 'non-traditional' because they do not align with the traditional notion of university students from middle-class or high socioeconomic backgrounds. However, the narratives presented in this sub-section suggest that the accumulation of capital valued within the education system can be facilitated by family support in 'non-traditional' student households.

The type of scholarly culture in the home discussed in this sub-section has been argued to provide a "*cultural toolkit*" of skills that can enhance educational attainment (Evans et al., 2010, p. 173). These skills seem grounded in literary practices and opportunities for new experiences, which parents encourage and actively engage in. Knowledge is now more accessible than ever; public libraries have allowed access to books with no economic cost, and the ongoing advancement of the online world has become ubiquitous. As such, it has perhaps become less about having the economic capital to own books and more about the interest in accessing knowledge and intellectual pursuit. Books, however, continue to represent knowledge and to consume them appropriately, there is an understanding that knowledge goes beyond that which you personally experience. This suggests that seeking knowledge through books and reading practices requires a sense of inquisitiveness which can be fostered through the family home environment.

5.4. Conclusions

This chapter has explored the three elements of family support identified in the stories of the first-generation students interviewed. Whilst the perspectives of the student's parents were not part of this research, it is important to note that their voices could have enriched our understanding. However, every PhD demands choices and for me prioritising the experiences of the students was paramount and attempts to triangulate this with their parents' perspectives had the potential to diminish how the students experienced it themselves. Thus, the analysis in this chapter centred on the participant's perceptions and interpretations of the support mechanisms within their family environment. By doing so, I have captured the essence of how these students characterised support as experienced through relationships with parents and key caregivers.

I suggest the discussion and analysis here progresses our understanding of 'support' in three ways. Firstly, I have examined the meanings attached to participants' explicit iterations of the term - and the implicit aspects often unrecognised by the participants. This support was experienced specifically within the family environment, with all participants offering stories where they were, to different extents, enabled by the supportive mechanisms in their parental relationships. Secondly, I have highlighted how aspirations are intrinsic to the families of these first-generation students, who were previously held back by the restricted opportunity structures related to their socioeconomic positions. Finally, reflecting quantitative correlations observed in other studies, I have demonstrated qualitatively how, for these students, early engagement with books and reading practices in the family home appears to have been a widespread and a powerful precursor to their successful educational careers. All in all, these findings point to the enormous significance of the social capital accessed through these forms of family support for their later progress to and in higher education.

One of the ways of theorising support here is that it *enables the use of capital*; support is a mechanism for allowing capital to be exchanged from one form into another, thus allowing it to have some use value. Parental relationships function as a crucial form of social capital during compulsory schooling. Future first-generation students can begin to plan and build their aspirations through these relationships. Whilst some types of cultural capital typically valued by higher education may be absent in these families (such as formal qualifications and a detailed knowledge of university), there are a plethora of ways that parents shape their children's future by mobilising the acquisition of valued cultural capital in education. This chapter, therefore, reinforces claims that the family environment is made up of a complex combination of knowledge and values (Reay et al., 2010) and that parents are "pivotal, not peripheral" to their children's decision-making around education (Patfield et al., 2021, p. 608).

Throughout this chapter, I have highlighted several instances in which young people recognised the possibilities they had to invest in their education. Understanding social capital more broadly as the resources that can be accessed through an individual's connections seems a more useful conceptualisation than focusing on the prestige of the connection itself. In other words, the value of social capital may not necessarily lie in how it enables access to higher-status connections specifically (such as professional occupations or elite clubs) but in how it can enable an individual to progress and advance in a broader sense. As such, social capital can be understood as experienced through context, with its value depending on one's subjective experiences. However, having capital is only of use if given the opportunity to spend it, and Bourdieu (1984) argues that the social capital gained through these

relationships is only “convertible, in certain conditions” (p. 107). Therefore, it is important to have opportunity structures that allow people to use the acquired capital. The widening participation agenda and the massification of higher education have allowed more people to progress to higher education, and it seems that many parents perceived the possibility of this having a positive impact on the future trajectory of their children. Whilst this seems a crucial aspect of the educational journey, the following chapter will highlight that this alone may not have been enough to secure a successful pathway into higher education.

6. Chapter Six - Meaningful Relationships: The Accumulation of Capital

In the previous chapter, I argued that parental support was crucial for enabling these first-generation students to consider education as a fruitful endeavour. Whilst family support was available for all participants, this was not their only source of capital. So, in this chapter, I will build on this and explore how other relationships had significant implications for their educational trajectory. The support received through their family environment was particularly prominent during their earlier schooling and provided an initial positioning of education as something to be valued. This alone may not have been sufficient for turning thoughts into actions. However, it enabled engagement in the educational environment and potentially, the relationships they experienced later were made more meaningful because of the support from their family.

In this chapter, I present an analysis which demonstrates how other relationships challenged their preconceived notions of what was possible and positioned undergraduate and, subsequently, postgraduate study as a real and achievable goal. I have identified, from interviews, three significant relationships that were enabling for progression in education: 1) the teacher-student relationship and the 'critical moments' that arose through interactions, 2) the relationship with peers and the broadening of their horizons, and 3) the partner relationship with its practical and emotional provision. I will demonstrate how, through these relationships, first-generation students can build the tangible and intangible resources needed to propel them to postgraduate study.

At the core of this chapter lies the concept of social capital and its significance in facilitating first-generation students' aspirations towards higher education. The value derived from their social connections is fundamental to the process of becoming a higher education student and positively shapes their educational outcomes. The value derived from their social capital network is crucial in helping individuals build their personal 'academic capital' – the qualifications, resources, and experiences - to access and succeed in higher education. As such, having networks of people who can provide encouragement, emotional support, new knowledge, and experiences acts as a mechanism for recognising and investing in one's academic potential. The availability of this social capital enables access to higher education opportunities and to navigate the educational system more effectively.

The coming chapter will begin with two stories – from Christina and Annie – which will offer a more holistic, rather than a thematic, approach to understanding how their social networks beyond the immediate family had implications for their educational trajectory. As noted in the previous chapter, the content of these stories overlaps with themes presented in Chapter

Five and Chapter Seven. but they have been selected to sit within this chapter as a good representation of the theme discussed here. For instance, these stories show how educational and reading practices are valued in the family environment. The focus of this chapter, however, is on the specific forms of relationships beyond the family and their influence on educational trajectories. Following the stories, I present an analysis, drawing on the sample as a whole, of the three different forms of relationships and how each enabled academic capital development. Firstly, I will explore the importance of the teacher-student relationship for validating academic achievement and connecting these first-generation students to the real possibility of undergraduate/postgraduate study. Secondly, I will consider how peer relationships encourage meaningful participation and the broadening of experiences in the educational field. Finally, I will highlight how partners/spouses provided relevant knowledge or emotional support, depending on whether they have or did not have higher education experience, respectively.

6.1. Christina’s Story: “Until that point, I’d never even considered it.”

Christina is a PhD candidate whose family moved house a lot when she was younger, leading to a fragmented education progression. Christina is female, aged between 31 – 35 years at the time of the interview and is of White – British ethnic background. The following story offers insight into how Christina came to recognise the capital at her disposal and invest this into higher education despite never considering university an option. It highlights how key interactions within the educational environment - with teachers and peers - offered the critical moments that helped her understand her capabilities and, eventually, propelled her to postgraduate study.

Christina moved around a lot during her early years, and her parents were separated. In her younger years, she lived on a “rough” council estate, which was often “violent.” Her mother has been married four times, partly why she moved house so often. Christina is unsure if her mother obtained O Levels, but she worked in care homes for many years before giving this up to claim disability benefits. Her father obtained O Levels and completed a course in landscape gardening before becoming a bus driver. Christina’s older brother struggled in school due to being bullied and having dyslexia. However, he started training to become an emergency healthcare assistant but gave this up when the company hit financial difficulties. He now works as a wagon driver and

enjoys earning what he sees as a high wage. Christina's half-sister left school with no qualifications and now claims disability benefits. Christina also has a half-brother and half-sister but does not know them well.

Generally, Christina enjoyed learning at primary school and sometimes "snuck" worksheets from the teacher's drawer because she "needed summat to do at home." She was ambidextrous, but her teachers would force her to write with her right hand, which was her main source of antagonism with the teachers. Due to moving schools, Christina did not have many friends but was happy if she had one friend to spend time with. Another house move meant that Christina joined a middle school partway through, which proved to be a difficult transition; she felt ostracised by her peers and teachers due to her appearance. Some conflicts were due to different expectations of the uniform between schools, and some were due to her mother sending her to school late or wearing the incorrect uniform. Christina felt that her teachers targeted her for this, and after one particularly embarrassing incident in a school assembly where she was "made an example of," she started "bunking off."

School was not discussed much at home. Christina's mum did not "push" her as "she knew she didn't need to" because she always got good reports on her parent's evenings. Christina knew she was cleverer than her brother and sister, as her mother often commented on this and would "brag" about her being "bright" and "clever" to others. Christina loved reading; her mother read to her when she was younger, and her grandmother bought her new books regularly. Christina spent a lot of time with her grandparents, and they took her on holidays to a caravan and spent time doing arts and crafts.

Christina's transition to secondary school was a more positive experience; feeling it was "like a fresh start" where her peers did not know about her isolation at the previous school. She liked her subjects and found them a positive learning experience as her teachers were more supportive. Christina had "more of a group of friends" in this school, felt "included" and that she "wasn't any different to any of them." Activities outside of school were mostly with friends, but she "never had any money" for specific hobbies, so she often made excuses about this to her friends. During her GCSEs, Christina was told to leave her mother's home (for undisclosed reasons) and moved to live with

her father, stepmother, half-brother, and half-sister. As they were all at school simultaneously, there was much encouragement from her father to focus on schoolwork. Despite this, the disruption to her home life and the emotional distance from her mother meant that Christina lost interest in school and did poorly in her GCSEs.

Christina “didn’t really have a plan” when she left school, so she applied to a nursing college like some of her peers. However, her home life was further disrupted by moving back to live with her mother; she quit the college course because of the commuting distance and took a job in a supermarket. Christina decided that she wanted to be a paramedic, but after phoning the recruitment line, she was told that she needed an A Level to show that she could “commit to studying for two years” and experience in a care setting. This resulted in her signing up for evening classes at the college and starting work in a care home.

Although she felt committed to studying, Christina did not do well, to begin with, struggling with one of her classes. She found a real interest in the subject and was surprised when she got an A for the coursework she had submitted. Her teacher praised this work as being of “university standard,” and Christina felt it was “totally embarrassing” when the teacher said, “You should think about going to uni” in front of the class. Christina felt that “in my head, up until that point, I’d never even considered it,” but her peers further encouraged this by telling her how the university funding system worked. With support from her teachers, Christina applied and was successful in securing a university place.

Christina attended a summer school before commencing university to learn essential skills such as referencing. She found it “scary” and “terrifying”, but she made a couple of friends who were also anxious about the new experience and eventually began to find it interesting and enjoyable to learn again. Christina was “outspoken” in school, and university was no different; she was not “embarrassed to ask questions” like her peers and would prefer someone to think she was “thick” than not to understand the subject. Christina was more interested in learning than some of her peers and was comfortable telling them to stop talking so that she could listen – this meant that Christina had a good relationship with the lecturers as there was “mutual respect.” Christina worked during university, doing shifts for her cleaning job before and after classes, but

maintained good grades. Her lecturer was so impressed by her work ethic that he contacted the local newspaper to write about her “being like a star student.” While “mortified” by this, she felt recognised for her efforts.

After her undergraduate degree, Christina applied for jobs but found they required a master’s degree. She decided to apply to do a master’s degree but did not realise that the undergraduate degree she had done was not fully accredited, which meant she needed to do a postgraduate diploma first. After completing these courses, she felt the “goalposts” had moved again and now needed a PhD to get the jobs she wanted. Luckily, the opportunity of a fee-waived PhD came up, so she decided to give it a go.

During the PhD, Christina became the assistant manager in a care home, working so many hours that it greatly impacted her studies. She felt a dissonance between working towards a qualification and working for real-world experience but eventually prioritised the PhD. Christina stepped down from the job and was supported financially by her partner. Christina prioritised her education due to her interest in the subject, her independence in progressing through education, and the prospect of getting a worthwhile job rather than becoming “the most qualified cleaner ever.”

6.2. Annie’s Story: “It felt like a bit of a door opening, actually.”

Annie is a PhD candidate who had a negative education experience and disengaged from the formal learning environment at quite an early age. Annie is female, aged 41 – 45 at the time of the interview and is of White – British ethnic background. The following story offers insight into how, despite her negative experiences at school, the relationships Annie had with her teachers helped her persevere and eventually become qualified.

Annie grew up on the street between “poverty-stricken” and “affluent” areas, but her family were “definitely poorer than everyone else that lived on those couple of streets” as her house did not have carpets. After leaving school, Annie’s mother became a secretary and spent time travelling until she fell pregnant with

Annie. She then became a part-time bookkeeper at a car garage, where she stayed for many years. Annie had no contact with her father, half-brother, or half-sister, so she did not know about their lives. Annie lived with her mother and grandmother and her uncle and aunt, who both had learning difficulties, so they found work difficult. Several extended family members lived in the town but were not close-knit.

Annie was “incredibly unhappy” at her Catholic primary school, finding there was “a great stigma attached to being an illegitimate child” of a single mother, which meant that other parents, children, and teachers were “openly cruel.” The school was “archaic” in that girls did cooking, boys did woodwork, and Annie “was in every sense excluded from the class.” She was physically isolated in the classroom, as the teachers thought her disengagement was due to being distracted by others. Annie did not learn the “nuts and bolts” expected at primary school as she could not take in what people were saying; she just saw “mouths moving” and heard the “Magic Roundabout” tune playing in her head (later attributed to Annie’s dyslexia).

Annie’s unhappiness at school was tied up with religion, so she “absolutely begged” her mother to attend a non-Catholic middle school. This school was more “laid back and relaxed,” she enjoyed the new experiences - doing metalwork and independent projects on political and current affairs. However, Annie became “annoyed” that the curriculum did not cover the things she was interested in and so started “skiving off school” to go “to the bloody library and read about the stuff” that did interest her. She had a particular interest in nuclear fusion, so she asked her mother to take her on a trip to Sellafields after the school turned down her request to visit with school.

Annie’s move to high school was “a perfectly timely transition,” but she was behind with her written work and maths. She was concerned that others thought she was “a bit slow, or not very clever, or not very capable,” but her anxiety came from having to demonstrate knowledge to someone through “prescriptive” exams that she did not feel she had the skills to do. Annie had always been an “avid reader” like her mum, so she felt confident with her first piece of GCSE English Literature coursework. However, a confrontation with a teacher meant she did not hand in the coursework. Neither did she attend any further classes

or sit the exam. One of Annie's teachers arranged after-school one-to-one support to help her catch up on missed work in other subjects; she felt "he must genuinely care" to offer to do this outside of usual hours. Annie was committed to a subject when she felt supported but left school with few GCSEs. She did not discuss school issues with her mother as she was conscious that her mother was "always tired, always stressed, always worried." Annie's mother was called into school to discuss attendance issues, but she was more "frustrated" that the school saw her as an unintelligent "single mum of a truanting kid" than she was at Annie for truanting.

Annie had little career aspiration and was ready to leave school when a teacher supported her in enrolling for A Level in Theatre Studies. During a production, she was approached by a "fancy" drama school and was offered a fee-waived place on a course, which Annie thought was "brilliant" and "like something out of a movie." Her mother's health began deteriorating, so there was little money coming into the home to support the unanticipated costs of theatre trips and costumes. This meant that Annie had to quit college and get a job to help support her family. After a couple of years, Annie met her husband and went self-employed, selling "stock on the market" and then opening a gift shop. An opportunity arose to open a hair salon with a neighbour, so "financially was doing pretty well for someone in their mid-twenties."

After the arrival of her first baby, Annie's now seriously ill mother needed round-the-clock care, her husband lost his job, and her business partner moved away, leaving Annie to run two businesses and work 80-hour weeks. Annie decided to sell both businesses to care for her baby and mother, feeling her life "flipped on its head." Annie cared for her mother for three years, during which time she had her second baby, and she felt she "hadn't done anything about 'me' for such a long time" and began to re-evaluate her options. Not wanting to go back to the working life she had before and feeling like she was at a "fork in the road," Annie signed up for evening classes at college.

Adult education was a "very different environment." Annie re-took her GCSE English and Maths, knowing that she needed these, and she persisted in learning the "skills" she felt she should "have learned at primary school." Annie felt she had interesting things to say but struggled to present them in a way

others found “acceptable.” One of her tutors suggested that Annie might have dyslexia, but as an avid reader, she rejected the idea. Annie went on to do an “Access to HE” course, which she enjoyed and excelled at, winning an academic excellence award from the exam board, which “felt like a bit of a door opening actually.” These experiences meant that Annie began to feel like she belonged in the education system, as there were “really dedicated people” who helped her flourish in what she was good at. She felt supported to make an application to university.

Although still cynical, Annie went for an assessment and learned she had dyslexia. The results were explained to her and how this translated to her experience, which helped her understand why she struggled in school. University became a “big new kind of learning curve” because it was about learning the subject and understanding how she learned differently. This gave her the confidence in lectures that even if she could not take in the information, she knew that she could “step away” and learn in a way that she found useful. Independent learning at university offered Annie a freedom that she did not have at school, and meeting people with different stories made Annie feel like she could also “be a part of this.” Annie’s husband supported her educational endeavours and encouraged her to take it as far as possible by applying for a PhD. Although Annie is sometimes in disbelief that she has got so far, she feels “empowered” by the opportunities it has given her to reflect on education and what she wants for her children.

6.3. Exploring the Influence of Relationships

In the following sections, I will consider how positive relationships outside the immediate family were critical for promoting educational progression. I will contribute to the discussion by arguing that having encouraging relationships enabled the recognition and accumulation of ‘academic capital’, which is then invested further into educational pursuits. Bourdieu’s perspective on academic capital emphasises the combination of cultural transmission of capital from the family and the school. It emphasises the amount of cultural capital directly transmitted from the family (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 15). One way that Bourdieu has operationalised the concept of academic capital is by considering the amount of time spent on education and the prestigious quality of that education (Bourdieu, 1984, 1988). This

suggests that the quantity and quality of education contribute to academic capital accumulation. Yet, it does little to explain sources of academic capital for those with the limited transmission of valued cultural capital from the family.

However, others have argued that academic capital is an “institutionalised form of cultural capital” that operates in higher education (Naidoo, 2004, p. 458) and thus should be conceptualised beyond the mere exchange value of the qualification. Furthermore, Naidoo (2010, p. 73) argues that “according to Bourdieu, acts of cognition are implemented to select and consecrate what is classified as “academic” and therefore what counts as valid criteria for entry and success in higher education.” This implies that the acquisition of academic capital, which may be required for accessing and being successful in higher education, is influenced by conceptions beyond the immediate context in which they are applied (Lavender, 2020). Adopting this perspective seems important for understanding how postgraduate researchers, who have abundant academic capital, have acquired this if not directly transmitted from the family. The following sections will explore how the value obtained from their social capital networks enabled these first-generation students to accumulate personal academic capital and examine more closely what constitutes the concept of ‘academic capital.’

6.3.1. Teachers and Critical Moments

One of the most significant relationships within the educational environment was between first-generation students and their teachers/lecturers. This sub-section captures the positive impact that teachers/lecturers had on early schooling, applying to university, and progression to postgraduate study. In particular, this sub-section highlights how these meaningful relationships engendered critical moments, which positioned academic progression and higher education as real and achievable possibilities. At one stage or another, most of the participants in this research referred to interactions with teachers/lecturers, which had the potential to have significant implications for their educational trajectories.

A ‘critical moment’ has been defined as an event which is understood to have important consequences for one’s trajectory, either understood directly by the interviewee or through the researcher’s interpretation (Holland & Thomson, 2009). Further, Giddens (1991) theorised about ‘fateful moments’, which require one to recognise, consider the consequences, and act upon the circumstances in a way that has crucial implications for the future. However, these critical moments are often unpredictable in their frequency and variety and in how people respond to them (Holland & Thomson, 2009; MacDonald & Shildrick, 2013). Notably, MacDonald and Shildrick (2013) argue that the significance and

the repercussions of these events are not always known at the time but that the resulting transition direction is interconnected with multiple external pressures. The moments described by the participants interviewed in this research positively affected educational transition. However, I argue that a combination of other factors contributed to the positive repercussions of these events.

Positively Influencing Early School Experiences

Prevalent across the biographical narratives presented by my participants were notions of critical moments that influenced their educational trajectory. Of note seemed a series of critical moments that were embedded within the social capital of the teacher-student relationship. The impact of a positive teacher-student relationship was especially important for those who had negative experiences of education during their early schooling. Annie's story highlighted how she had disengaged from school life during her early years, yet this did not mean she disengaged from learning itself. Annie spoke about her one positive learning experience in the classroom, which emerged through her relationship with a teacher whom she "respected" and described as "very strict, really firm, but really fair." Annie went on to state:

In the final year of primary school, I do remember taking something up to her [teacher] desk ... and I remember her saying, "Oh, so you can do it, you're not as stupid as you make out are you?" And which actually sounds really mean but to me that was one of the nicest things anyone had ever said at school to me, and I was really like sat down all pigeon-chested saying, "Oh I'm not stupid", and so then I started to do things when she set tasks in the class I would kind of do things and engaged a little bit – Annie (41-45, Female, white)

Annie attributed her later engagement with school to this one positive interaction, reflected in her discussion further when she said, "I just warmed to her, and I think I did probably learn some things in her class in the last year." This highlights how critical this relationship was for Annie in navigating and participating in an environment she ordinarily felt detached from. This is unlike others who have found that potentially negative interactions with teachers had the opposite effect, becoming a turning point towards disengagement (MacDonald & Shildrick, 2013). Similarly, Nina struggled during her early schooling, later returning to college to start her qualifications from scratch. However, she spoke about how her teacher actively inspired her when she struggled with her first essay:

The first person to ever inspire me was somebody called [teacher's name] she was the history teacher at [college], and she taught me the British social history, and I remember writing my first essay for it ... I didn't even get the title right in fairness, it's a shit show that essay and she made me cry, she made me cry, and I said, "I can't do it" and I were ready to bail at that point, I were like, "I can't do it because I can't

even write, I'm crap I haven't got any skills whatsoever to get me through this." I never thought, and I remember she sat there and she said to me, "You are not thick; you can do it, you just need to change your thinking completely, you need to be," you know, and she inspired me, and she said to me, "What I want you to do is go away and rewrite this essay." So I did, and every single essay I wrote after that, I got a distinction because I felt like I weren't going to let it defeat me – Nina (26-30, Female, White)

Like Annie, Nina spoke of a specific interaction with a particular teacher as a crucial turning point that enabled her to participate in education meaningfully. These positive relationships with teachers proved a crucial source of social capital that influenced their engagement and enabled them to progress academically. It was clear in both narratives that they struggled with the perception of their academic ability, with their teachers' explicit statements about them not being "*stupid*" or "*thick*" holding significant value to their ability to persevere. However, these critical moments revealed opportunities for overcoming these hurdles by supporting their needs.

Making University a Real Possibility

Positive interactions with trusted teachers enabled educational progression to be positioned as a clear possibility and often connected first-generation students to the idea of higher education for the first time. Josie spoke about how she was connected to the idea of university at a relatively young age:

When I was younger, we didn't really talk about uni, or you know, going on to what the future would hold, but I remember at one parent's evening in comprehensive, my English teacher said to my mum, "Josie is university material," and my mum remembers her saying that, and ... I was what 11, and she said that and I suppose that stuck in my head and my mum remembers her saying that as well. So perhaps if somebody sees something in you, believes in you, then you've got something to work towards, I guess and say, "Yeah," you know, "I can do it" – Josie (36-40, Female, White)

Josie described how university was not discussed in the home environment. Hence, how her teacher connected her to this idea seemed crucial to her later progression. She recalled being described as "*university material*," which stayed with her throughout her educational journey and subsequently became a resource she employed to progress to higher education. For others, they were connected to the idea at a crucial point when decision-making around progression was imminent. In Christina's story presented earlier, it was highlighted how she had been engaged with learning during early schooling, but it was only during college that she was connected to the idea of university; Christina said:

When I put in the coursework, I got an A for it, and the lecturer phoned me, and she was like, "I can't believe the kind of level of that", and she said, "If I didn't know any

better, I would say that's university standard", and I was like, "Shut up!" And she ended up saying this in front of everybody in the class, and I was mortified ... the lecturer was kind of bigging this up and totally embarrassing me and then saying, "You should think about going to uni", and I was like, "Don't be stupid, uni's for rich people" because in my head up until that point I'd never even considered it. For me, uni was for people who could afford it, people who had mummy and daddy paying for it, do you know what I mean, and I'd never, it never even crossed my mind – Christina (31-35, Female, White)

This quote from Christina highlighted the impact of a positive relationship between her and her lecturer. This moment was significant for Christina as she had never considered university a viable option. She perceived university as a place for wealthy people with the economic capital to support this endeavour. However, her teacher's positive feedback and encouragement challenged her beliefs and assumptions about what was possible for her, offering new opportunities for development and growth. This could suggest that Christina did not have the types of cultural capital which allowed her access to understandings of the higher education system. Thus, she saw higher education as inaccessible. However, through the social capital of the teacher-student relationship, she expanded her capital to broaden her opportunities and see university as a possibility.

Inspiring Doctoral Study

The teacher-student relationship was similarly crucial for the first-generation student's progression to postgraduate study, with lecturers shaping their trajectory by suggesting pursuing a higher degree. Joanna spoke about how her lecturer connected her to the idea of studying for a PhD:

I never thought about doing a master's ever, or a PhD, like it just never even like crossed my mind and then it was [lecturer's name] actually, she was my final year tutor, and she said, she like pulled me aside, one day and said, "Have you thought about doing a PhD?" and I said, "Well no," and she said, "I think you should go for it, you'd be really good" – Joanne (21-25, Female, White)

Before this conversation, Joanna had yet to consider pursuing a higher level of study, which indicates that she potentially had a lack of awareness or exposure to this possibility. This suggests that the relationship with her lecturer was important for challenging preconceived notions of participation and for expanding aspirations. This was an overwhelming trend during the interviews, whereby lecturers connected the students to the idea of doctoral study for the first time. For instance, Jenny (50+, Female, White) stated that her lecturer asked, "Have you thought about doing a PhD?" and Nina (26-30, Female, White) described how her lecturer said, "I think that's what you need to do next, you need to do a PhD, pick a topic, and we'll do it." These simple interactions further highlight the role of social capital in providing critical access to new opportunities, helping students to build relevant capital in the

educational environment, and shaping their trajectories. The way my participants spoke about these pivotal interactions suggests that not only did their teacher/lecturer challenge their preconceived notions about university, but their positive feedback also validated their academic abilities, which enabled them to consider and act upon these new possibilities. Roland spoke more explicitly about how he came to recognise his abilities and new possibilities through the way his lecturer “*inspired*” him:

It was really him [lecturer] that sort of inspired me really to at least, you know, to think, “God, I can achieve a master's out of this.” Again the PhD wasn't even in sight at that point, but then as I was getting distinctions, I think I got distinctions in seven out of my nine modules on the master's, which is again, “Oh my god, I'm not that thick after all, I can actually do this”, and then it was like [lecturer's name] that said, “Look Roland you really ought to be thinking about doing a PhD because you've got it in you to do it” and it was those sorts of conversations I had with him really that made me think well yeah I can be a lot better than what I already am type of thing, like, I thought this was my life, and that's how it had to be, and clearly that's not the case – Roland (46-50, Male, White)

The relationship between Roland and his lecturer significantly shaped his participation and educational trajectory. It not only inspired him to do well during his master's degree but also encouraged him to pursue a PhD, neither of which had been on his radar before entering the higher education environment. The encouragement and support present in their relationship's social capital enabled Roland to overcome his beliefs about his academic abilities and envision opportunities that he had not previously thought were possible. This highlights how this type of ‘mentor’ relationship is important for notions of self-belief and thus could be understood as a crucial form of emotional capital. This type of relationship also enabled these first-generation students to map and plan their futures, as Aaron explained:

I'd spoken to a couple of tutors about what I might do after uni, and they give me some options like master's, possibly PhD, and one of the other tutors, who's just actually had her viva the other day, she also told me about the fee-waiver as well, so that was always in the back of my mind, but I always, it were never really an option until [lecturer's name] sent me this plan over ..., because I never really thought to myself, I never really had that idea of how it would go, a PhD, and when he mapped it out there, kind of give me a plan, I thought I could probably do that, but then I thought well what am I going to get from it, and I thought like a lecturers position, and I thought I'd love to do that as a job, lecturing – Aaron (26-30, Male, White)

Aaron spoke about how his interactions with his tutors and lecturer had exposed him to different options for postgraduate study; his relationship with his lecturer made pursuing a PhD seem like a real possibility. The lecturer provided Aaron with a clear plan for pursuing a PhD and what a PhD in his subject might look like, enabling him to understand how it might fit into his life and career goals. Further, Aaron began to understand the benefits of pursuing

a PhD, and the idea of becoming a lecturer became a motivating factor. This demonstrates how the social capital of the teacher-student relationship promoted a supportive relationship, enabling Aaron to see new possibilities in his education and career aspirations. Moreover, his tutor had told him about the possibility of being awarded a fee waiver for postgraduate study (a university initiative for obtaining a first-class undergraduate degree), potentially reducing the economic barrier Aaron may have experienced. This further expanded his cultural capital in this environment as the tutor/lecturer's knowledge of the academic field enabled him to overcome potential barriers and gain insight into the value of pursuing higher study and the career opportunities it could bring.

Section Summary

Critical moments are useful for understanding the experiences of first-generation students in relation to their decision-making and academic progression. It seems that these critical moments are embedded within their relationships with trusted teachers, and they became fateful moments when their decision to pursue higher education resulted from specific interactions. Yet their willingness to take action based on these encouraging events implies that they already had some concept of their ability to do so. Holland and Thomson (2009, p. 458) argue that "it is the configuration and timing of these events that become significant", as well as the extent to which individuals can respond with "resources" and "resourcefulness." This can be understood in terms of capital, whereby a critical moment for academic progression may be the culmination of the social capital acquired through relations with parents, peers, and teachers and the subsequent realisation of academic capital these relationships have enabled access to. It could be that these teacher-student relationships become particularly meaningful because of the initial mobilisation of capital embedded within the supportive mechanism of their family environment.

While others have found that critical moments arise from significant and often traumatic life experiences, such as bereavement or ill health (MacDonald & Shildrick, 2013; Mulhall, 2016), these findings point to the significance of relatively minor but meaningful interactions. It also argues for the importance of positive teacher-student relationships for positioning the university as a real possibility for those who do not have access to certain types of capital through their family environment. However, similar to the research of Gardner and Holley (2011), these connections were often serendipitous rather than embedded within the structure and strategy of educational institutions. This raises questions about how much this has to do with luck or chance for those who potentially rely on such relationships.

6.3.2. Peers and Distributed Experiences

Peer relationships were prominent across the stories, and the experience of these relationships seemed influential in quite specific ways. Firstly, this sub-section captures how the participants were enabled to participate meaningfully in education by comparing themselves to their peers. Secondly, this sub-section captures how relationships with peers from different societal backgrounds positively broadened their experiences and opportunities. Comparisons were made in relation to both academic progression and socioeconomic background, drawing on the value of their connections relative to the given field and social space (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

Influencing Meaningful Participation

Peer relationships seemed influential for around two-thirds of the participants. Drawing academic comparisons between themselves and their peers seemed to have a positive impact on how they chose to participate in education. When speaking about their peers during early schooling, some referred to how their peers seemed “*cleverer*” than them but that this encouraged them to think differently about their participation in education. Lydia spoke about a friend whom she was “*envious*” of and how this impacted her attitude towards education:

I had one friend who was very, very clever, and she was in the top sets, and I can't remember what you used to get in year six, but she was like the highest; I used to always be a little bit envious actually so I used to be like, “How do you know that?” like, and but then I used to always be like, “I want to be like her” ... and then realised that actually if I did put the effort in I probably could be just as clever as the person sat next to me – Lydia (21-25, Female, White)

Similarly, Tara spoke about how she saw her friend “*doing well*”, and this encouraged her to realise that she also wanted to “*do well*”:

[Friend's name] got accepted onto a science scholarship for a private school, and I was a bit like, “Oh god, I'm losing my best friend” because I knew I wouldn't be able to go to private school, so yeah, I knew that she'd got accepted on to that and I thought I'm gonna have to go to like a good sixth form because she's going to a private school, I didn't feel in competition with her, but I knew she was doing well and I kind of wanted to do well as well – Tara (21-25, Female, White)

The narratives Lydia and Tara shared illustrated how peer relationships were important for realising their potential. Whilst they both initially suggested that their friends knew more than them or were more capable than them, they both attached this to the positive impact it had on their academic progression. Through the distributed capital of their peer relationships,

they were enabled to build aspirations and saw that others achieving meant they could also achieve during early schooling. Peer relationships helped them participate meaningfully, and a similar notion continued into higher education. However, at university, it seemed connected less to notions of academic capability and more to understanding the appropriate behaviour in that environment. Kathy spoke about the impact her relationship had on her participation at university:

Luckily having my boyfriend, kind of watching how he behaved, and he came home, and he did work, and he worked long hours, and he was showing me how to do it. Honest to God, if I hadn't been with him, I would have failed, and I would have dropped out straight away because I didn't have a clue what I was doing until he told me. He was someone I could model the behaviour off then because, like without him; I just didn't know what to do – Kathy (26-30, Female, White)

On a similar note, Rachel spoke about how she had “*older friends*” whilst at university, and she considered that this meant they were more “*focused*” and “*invested*” in the environment. She spoke about how these relationships positively impacted her participation:

I had older friends, so they were, like, more into it than like the younger people were ... I think if you're a mature student and you go back into it, you're more focused and want to do well because they're more invested aren't they, so I think being friends with them, and they were like doing their work, and I was like, “Oh well I've got to do my such and such as well” so I think that helped having people that weren't going out all the time – Rachel (21-25, Female, White)

The way Kathy and Rachel spoke about their peers illustrated the importance of these relationships as people they could “*model the behaviour off.*” It helped them to participate meaningfully in the field. It seems that by the time they have accessed university, these first-generation students draw on their peer connections less to promote academic capability and more to understand how to navigate the new environment. Their peer relationships enabled them to recognise their academic capability and gave them the opportunity and motivation to push forward. This was often discussed in a way that foregrounded a competitive aspect to the academic environment whereby once they understood their academic capability relative to their peers, this inspired them to continue achieving. Nigel spoke about how he grappled with being labelled a “*swot*” during secondary school:

I tried to work hard and earn as many house points as I could, but by doing that, it created, I think, a certain degree of jealousy within the class and you know people used to call me swot, and you think, you know whatever, but sometimes it does, if it's persistent it can get under your skin, but I didn't let it get under my skin to the extent that I was withdrawn or I would lash out. It just proved to me that I was on the right track because it provoked a reaction so, in a way, it was giving me feedback that actually I was doing well ... I saw it initially as negative, but then I saw it as positive because if I wasn't doing well, then they wouldn't be calling me swot, so it was good

in a way; I turned a negative thing into a very positive thought in my mind which actually gave me the motivation and the drive to push even more – Nigel (41-45, Male, White)

Nigel's narrative suggested that being called a "swot" had negative connotations and that his peers used this as a derogatory term. However, Nigel was clear on how these relationships offered him positive feedback on his progression, motivated him, and enabled him to participate "even more" in his educational endeavours. It seems then that through these relationships, one begins to recognise the capital in oneself and others and uses this as motivation to achieve in the academic environment. For some of the participants, then, their peer relationships had a positive impact on how they understood their own academic capability and environment.

Broadening of Experiences, Knowledge, and Values

As highlighted in the previous chapter, there seemed to be a self-awareness of the participants' own socioeconomic position throughout the interviews. This was not only apparent through the way they discussed their family environment but also through their relationships with their peers. Whilst it is perhaps only on reflection that they understand their experiences through this lens, there was an awareness of differences in backgrounds amongst their peers. Jenny was a mature student and spoke extensively about her experiences in school as being imbued with her feeling that she was firmly from a working-class background but was privileged to gain a scholarship to attend a grammar school (traditionally a more middle-class environment). Jenny spoke about peers who were from a different background to her and how she wanted to "be like them":

I made friends with some really decent girls who I'd not known them before, but they were very into their education, and most of them came from backgrounds similar to mine but had university-educated people in their family, and I was aware, even at 11 and 12, that they were different to me, that their backgrounds were different to mine, but I wanted to be like them ... I thought they had nice, ordered lives, you know, and they had beautifully packed up lunches and really well, it seemed to me on the surface, well cared for kids, socks were all really white, and none had lost their elastic around the top and were falling down and things like this – Jenny (50+, Female, White)

Charlotte (41-45, Female, White) similarly spoke of how widening her peer network meant she had access to new experiences and ways of being. The recording failed during Charlotte's interview, but the following extracts are from the notes I made immediately afterwards:

Her early school friends were those in her form, those who lived close by or through the church, but in her later years, when she chose her subjects and got put in different sets, her network became vaster.

Being part of the Christian Union meant she was also with different age groups, so her network was built upwards, as well as outwards. She found herself with friends whose parents were from more professional backgrounds - parents who were teachers and doctors - so she moved out of this bubble of where she had been and what she knew, and she saw there was a bigger world out there and that there were more opportunities and more things that she could be.

Jenny and Charlotte offered insights into how they recognised the differences between their own backgrounds and those of their peers. Jenny spoke in specific ways about her peers' packed lunches and clean socks, which, to her, were representative of "nice, ordered lives" and something that she had not experienced herself. Charlotte spoke more broadly about how her peer network enabled her to see a bigger world than the bubble she had previously experienced. This suggests that their relational positioning with their peers can constitute an important mechanism for accessing social capital, which bridges first-generation students to new opportunities. This was prevalent inside and outside the specific learning environment and was considered a positive experience.

Similar positive narratives were presented concerning peer networks at university, with many finding their meaning at the intersection of differences. Previous research on notions of 'fitting in' at university has recurrently found that many students from less privileged backgrounds feel isolated or alienated from their peers at university (Bradley, 2017; Crozier et al., 2016; Gagnon, 2018; Reay et al., 2010). However, in general, this was not the case for the participants in this research. This seemed to be because many perceived that meeting new and different people led them to new and positive experiences; David spoke particularly about his move away from home to live in halls of residence:

People definitely have very different views, erm, and experiences to me. I remember moving in on the first day, I was in a shared flat with eight people, and there was, ya know, as you get at university, the most random compilation of people ... I just thought these they're all a bunch of weirdos, but within a very short space of time I thought it was actually, I found it very interesting, and that's not changed while I have been at uni throughout the whole thing, meeting people from different backgrounds and experiences and kind of getting to know them, and learning different things and experiences, learning from them as well as kind of, yeah, just having friends that aren't from the same messed up societal background – David (26-30, Male, White)

David was clear about what he gained from the social capital embedded in his new relationships with people from different "societal backgrounds" - experiences, knowledge, and views. Further, Robert spoke about how he was exposed to new values and beliefs, particularly in relation to political views of the world:

I had a lot of wake-ups in terms of values and beliefs, certainly politically understanding things, you know, I wasn't exposed to anything other than the views

and values that I'd kind of been surrounded with ... understanding about the world, you know things like learning around from people talking about the situation between Palestine and Israel and stuff like that, that came up as conversations that I hadn't had any knowledge or understanding or engagement with – Robert (36-40, Male, White)

David and Robert offered an insight into how they recognised the experiences and learning opportunities that arose from connecting with peers from different backgrounds. Such notions were common amongst this group of first-generation students, and their narratives suggest that these relationships enabled them to shift their understandings of the world to a recognition that there were different ways of being. It also seemed that many found university to be a heterogenous environment where there was not one way of being, as Tara stated:

I felt like everyone was such different people, so like there was some people who'd got children, and there was some people who had, you know, different cultures, it was something that I'd never really experienced before ... it was really eye-opening like all the different students who was on the same course as me, so I didn't really feel like it was a case of fitting in, I didn't feel like there was anything to fit into because everyone was so different – Tara (21-25, Female, White)

The narratives presented by the first-generation students in this research are a stark contrast to the findings of other research, which have found that non-traditional students struggle to relate to their peers at university because they face judgements for their social background or feel illegitimate in the environment (Bradley, 2017; Crozier et al., 2016; Gagnon, 2018). In this case, the first-generation students had positive experiences of the environment because they could build positive relationships with their peers, which provided them with social capital. The social capital they accessed through these meaningful relationships with peers provided opportunities, motivation, and knowledge to navigate the environment. This social capital enabled them to see how to participate in the environment and what other capital they had to participate with.

The social capital in these peer relationships could be described as 'bridging' social capital (Putnam, 2000), which refers to the resources one can access through relationships with others from different backgrounds or cultures. Furthermore, it also offers opportunities for 'linking' with those outside their socioeconomic position (Woolcock, 2001) who may have access to more valued resources. Simultaneously, this built more capital, enabling them to develop the complexity of their participation in the environment. These intangible resources accessed through their social relationships could be described as academic capital – that which helps one thrive in the educational context – and building this could be key to finding a fit in university and their future progression to postgraduate study.

Section Summary

This sub-section has highlighted the importance of context for recognising and investing this social capital into education in a meaningful or useful way. The nature of the higher education institution itself could impact the ability of first-generation students to access these meaningful connections, given the diversity of the student body within and across institutions. This may go towards explaining the differences in findings between this research and the other studies mentioned above; the data collection site of this research may pose considerable differences to that of others, particularly concerning the proportion of students within an institution from different equity backgrounds. Whilst I will offer further reflections on this in Chapter Eight, it seems prudent to acknowledge here that the environment of some universities may be more or less conducive to fostering these types of relationships than others. Where there continues to be class bullying in university contexts, for example, this may impact the ability to access and recognise the potential benefits of these social relationships.

6.3.3. Partners and Encouraging Engagement

Though less commonly discussed amongst the participants, romantic and spousal relationships were also an important catalyst for promoting progression into university. This sub-section captures how romantic partners were key sources of social capital, both in circumstances where the partner had experience of higher education and where they did not. In particular, it highlights how the transmission of knowledge and ongoing emotional support were positive resources in their continued engagement with educational progression. As discussed in Chapter Three, some have argued that when defining a person as “first-generation”, their partner’s higher education experience (as well as their children’s) should form part of the criteria since they enable access to capital similarly to immediate family members. This research defined “first-generation” as those without parents or siblings with university experience; thus, the possibility of a partner’s involvement was likely to arise. The following discussion suggests that partners with higher education experience can provide crucial forms of capital for enabling these students to progress to university. However, partners without this experience were also just as significant in promoting the progression.

Knowledge From Partners with Higher Education Experience

The significance of the partner relationship seemed to arise most prominently for those returning to education after a break and somewhat at a “fork in the road” regarding their career planning and development. Ralph had spent some years in the army before leaving

there and becoming a prison officer, something which he no longer wished to pursue. He spoke about the influence of his wife in positioning university as a possibility for him:

I was interested in the psychology and stuff behind it all, and my wife's a teacher, and my sister-in-law was a teacher at the time as well, and they both kind of said, "Why don't you study for an OU [Open University] degree and obviously in a subject you enjoy and you'll get something out of it and obviously it'll cost you a bit of money, but you'll get something out of it as well" ... I started thinking what am I really going to do because I didn't really have any focus at that time, it was just sort of a decision, I didn't want to stay being a prison officer, I sort of knew that straight away, I didn't want to spend the rest of my life doing that because it's a difficult job but also having got married in that year and everything else it was like I've got a mortgage now, got kids, you know, you can't sort of just change your job that easily can you so obviously I needed quite a robust plan – Ralph (41-45, Male, White)

Ralph highlighted the potential difficulties of changing career trajectories while balancing financial and caring commitments. Ralph spoke of his interest in his subject and further went on to discuss his time in the army as being “*all about education*” with a “*hell of a lot to learn*”, and he reflected on how his “*whole life has been spent doing bloody education.*” So, whilst he may have already been inclined towards learning activities, his relationship with his wife gave him access to how to pursue this further. This was positioned as something that Ralph could engage with whilst continuing with his employment. His wife's (presumed) knowledge of the Open University as a place that offered part-time, distance, and flexible study arrangements was crucial for Ralph to make a “*robust plan*” that meant he could balance studying with his employment and family responsibilities. Similarly, Aaron was connected to the possibility of university when he was in employment that he did not enjoy. Before working this job, he had spent several years training at a club to become a professional rugby player. His career plans had always been tied up with the sport until he had a major injury, which meant he could no longer play and was eventually let go from the club:

I didn't do anything in that time until August in which I had a phone call from my dad and he said that his boss at work needed someone to go and work just for a few days so I went there, worked for a few days and then he said, "We need someone permanent, we can take you on permanent" so I worked with my dad in road construction for around three years maybe, hated it, didn't enjoy it. ... and basically one day, I'd just got this new girlfriend, and she was at uni. She was doing paediatric nursing, and she was like, "Do you not fancy going to uni?" And I said, "Yeah," and so one day we just sat down and applied, and here we are today really – Aaron (26-30, Male, White)

The turning point for Aaron was when he entered a new relationship with someone already pursuing a degree at university. He spoke further about the way she helped him to navigate this new endeavour; he said how his partner “*helped me with the application, and then she helped me at the time with things like referencing, and you know, bits and bobs, she kind of give me an indication what it might be like.*” It seems that for Aaron, his partner was crucial

for connecting him to the idea of university and enabling him access to tangible resources, such as knowledge around application processes and referencing, and intangible resources, such as getting a feel for what university might be like. These types of capital that can be accessed from someone with experience of the environment are reminiscent of those inherent in families with higher education in their history (Winterton & Irwin, 2012).

Encouragement From Partners Without Higher Education Experience

On the other hand, some had partners who encouraged them to pursue their educational journeys despite not having experience in higher education. The most important aspect of these relationships is the bonding social capital, the emotional capital shared between them, and the encouragement to pursue something new in times of uncertainty. Having left school early, Nina spent several years working in hospitality; however, after two consecutive pregnancies and now with two young children, she felt at a place where she needed to find something of her own:

I were just fed up of working a job, and I didn't feel like I'd got anything of my own, and I lost my identity when I were pregnant; I felt like I weren't me anymore, and my husband said, "If you could do anything, what would it be?" ... and I remember, I think I was watching Criminal Minds or something like that. I were like, "I'd do that because I quite enjoy that, because there's sick people there isn't there, and I quite like sick people" So my husband were like, "Go to college and do it", so I did. But without my husband, I don't think I would have; my husband encouraged me – Nina (26-30, Female, White)

Nina presented a narrative where her husband enabled her to consider her interests and reflect on her desire for agency and fulfilment in her future choices. He encouraged her to have ambitious aspirations by questioning her on what she would do if she could *do anything*, which opened space for her to consider her aspirations beyond her current circumstances. This proved to be a pivotal point for Nina as she considered her interest in criminal psychology, and her husband's encouragement to pursue this at college significantly transformed the thought into action. This bonding social capital was crucial for transmitting emotional capital in Nina's pursuit of her new goals. Similarly, Christina reflected on her partner's role in encouraging her to pursue higher education. Earlier in this chapter, I explored part of Christina's narrative where she discussed how she had not considered university until her teacher suggested she apply since she felt university was reserved for wealthy people. She later spoke about her partner's response to the idea of applying:

I'd mentioned it, and he [partner] was like, "Aye, go for it, do it," so I was still thinking university is not for people like me do you know what I mean, and then he said, "put the application in and see, if it happens, it happens, and if it don't, it don't" sort of thing – Christina (31-35, Female, White)

This response from her partner seemed to further challenge Christina's doubts, with him taking a pragmatic approach to the application and encouraging her to act but to remain open about the outcome. Christina spoke further about the impact her partner has had on her continued progression through higher education:

I wouldn't have said I couldn't have done it without her [mother], do you know what I mean? Whereas I would say that about my man because I'd be sitting up, "I've got an assignment due in a couple of days, I'm going to sit up and do this," and he'd bring me a cup of tea and stuff like that, you know like "you haven't eaten all day," stuff like that, he would be "just shut yourself away, I'll get the washing done and the dishes or whatever" ... I've had the support of my partner financially, I wouldn't have been able to do it if I were single kind of thing, and I wouldn't have been able to afford to live and only do a cleaner's job kind of thing – Christina (31-35, Female, White)

Christina was clear on the tangible ways that her partner enabled her to participate in her educational endeavours: financial support and undertaking household chores. The economic capital that her partner was able to contribute to the home environment was a significant aspect of Christina's ability to pursue her goals, as without it, she felt that education would not have been possible. Her partner's commitment to taking care of household tasks, bringing her tea, and ensuring she ate showed an understanding of her needs and a willingness to provide a supportive environment. Both narratives presented by Nina and Christina illustrate how their access to bonding social capital and emotional capital through their spousal relationships was critical to enable them to see beyond their current circumstances and aspire towards new goals. Unlike Ralph and Aaron, whose partners enabled them access to relevant and important knowledge of the higher education field, Nina and Christina had partners who provided emotional support, encouragement, and space to pursue a new endeavour.

6.4. Conclusions

In this chapter, I have explored how social networks beyond the family have been harnessed as a valuable resource to bridge the gaps in knowledge and experience for first-generation students. Whilst the family provided an initial foundation for building pro-education perspectives, these distributed relationships were needed to build on that foundation and to propel these students into and through higher education. The value derived from these connections with teachers, peers, and partners has tangible and intangible components that contribute to their personal 'academic capital'. Knowledge of university systems and processes, the development of specific skills, broader notions around planning, and the space and time free from life's necessities appear to all be tangible assets acquired through these networks. Of a more intangible nature, the challenging of personal perspectives

through positive feedback and encouragement, as well as expanding aspirations through exposure to new experiences, views, and beliefs, seem also to be an important part of the picture for success in this environment. This exposure and access to other's capital resources seemed a crucial aspect of the value obtained from the social capital. As such, positive and meaningful relationships have significantly shaped the educational trajectories of these first-generation students.

The value acquired through these social networks positively affects an individual becoming a student in the higher education field. These valuable resources are all institutionalised forms of cultural or academic capital needed to participate successfully within the university environment. Acknowledging the role of social capital as a mechanism for recognising and investing in academic capital offers insight into how others can shape one's own educational outcomes. Part of the mechanism of its value then is the 'cashing in' of capital whereby an individual can employ one type of capital and exchange it for another. It was clear how many could leverage the academic capital available in their networks to recalibrate their behaviours. Thus, the cultural capital of others became their social capital. By converting their social capital into academic capital, these first-generation students could navigate the complexities of university, leveraging their relationships and enhancing opportunities and outcomes. This mechanism is unclear in the existing literature that employs capital theory to understand the first-generation experience.

Critical moments played a pivotal role in facilitating the exchange of social capital into academic capital. From interactions that challenged their preconceived notions about the higher education system to ones that fostered belief in their abilities, these moments seemed crucial catalysts for promoting new educational endeavours. As such, it is important to recognise that social capital is not evenly distributed, so access to these critical, seemingly ad-hoc and random interactions varies across individuals. Chance can play a part. Furthermore, converting social capital into academic capital is dynamic and influenced by contexts, social network interactions, and individual agency. Whilst many individuals possess social capital, their ability to convert it into academic capital could be influenced by external factors such as institutional structures and systemic barriers.

7. Chapter Seven - Long-Term Goals: The Investment of Capital

In Chapter Five and Chapter Six, I explored how first-generation students navigated their engagement and participation in education via their interpersonal relationships within the family, with their peers, partners, and teachers across their learning journey. I have argued that these relationships have enabled the mobilisation, recognition, and accumulation of important forms of capital that have allowed them to see university as an opportunity that they can access and in which they can be successful. In this chapter, I present an analysis of the complex and dynamic nature of family and peer relationships for these postgraduate students who now encounter juxtaposed worlds. I argue that a disjuncture and potential conflict can arise within the realm of their social capital when their elevated levels of academic capital become 'out of sync' with their social and economic capital. However, I will demonstrate how these first-generation students negotiated this by prioritising the accumulation and investment of their academic capital.

Existing research has often described how non-traditional students (such as first-generation students) face complex difficulties and unspoken demands when moving away from previous familial practices. In particular, there has been a focus on undergraduate students and how they do not feel they fit into their home or university environments (Bassett et al., 2019; Lee & Kramer, 2013; Mann, 2016; Waller et al., 2011). Much less common is research that describes how 'non-traditional' students can be successful without cutting ties with earlier relationships that do not seem to fit into their new lives. An emergent meaning from interviews suggested that people can successfully negotiate both environments. One of this chapter's aims is to explore exactly this: whilst I will highlight potential areas for uneasiness and conflict, the focus will be on the mechanisms that enabled their continued participation and success in the postgraduate environment. It seems important for these students to accept their changing worlds and acknowledge that their educational pursuits are a priority because of the perceived benefits for themselves and their families.

The chapter will begin with two stories – about George and David – which, as in earlier chapters, offer a more holistic, rather than thematic, overview of the changing nature of their relationships once they commence postgraduate study. The stories presented here broadly overlap with the themes presented in Chapter Five and Chapter Six. Still, they have been selected to sit within this chapter as a good representation of this theme specifically. For instance, these stories show how their families valued education and how relationships beyond the home environment influenced educational progression decisions. The focus of this chapter, however, is on the changing nature of relationships as they navigate postgraduate study. Following these two stories, I offer an analysis of how these first-

generation students navigate and manage their relationships in line with their elevated levels of academic capital. Firstly, I explore how they prioritise their long-term goals despite conflict arising between their own and other's experiences and expectations. Secondly, I highlight how the distance between home and university life is negotiated by accepting and embracing these differences. Finally, I consider how these students take pride in their accomplishments and their new role in the family as 'trailblazers' for their siblings and children.

7.1. George's Story: "I need to just make sure that I don't forget where I'm from."

George is a PhD candidate who returned to postgraduate study as a mature student through his professional role. George is male, aged between 36 – 40 years at the time of the interview, and has a White – British ethnic background. The following story offers insight into how George managed different worlds despite not feeling like he ever fully embodied either one. It highlights how he worked hard towards achieving his ambitions, and his aspirations remained at the forefront of his university participation, enabling him to effectively manage his relationships.

George grew up living in a pub with his mother, father, brother, and sister. The pub was in a small, "nice village, quite posh", and the pub was situated on the intersection between a street with large, "expensive houses" and a "council estate." His mother had not enjoyed school and left at age 13 without formal qualifications; she then worked in a department store. His father spoke more favourably of school and went into the Navy when he left. His parents met in the department store and moved into the pub industry together. George's brother and sister both left education after their GCSEs. His brother returned to do a mechanics qualification but did not enjoy it, so he began working with computers. His sister returned to education, commencing healthcare training but did not finish it, eventually moving on to manage a bar in a local club.

George enjoyed primary school and got on with the teachers because he was "well-behaved" compared to his peers. George's parents did not have much oversight over his schooling, although they encouraged him to read because it was "a good thing to do for enjoyment and pleasure and just general self-improvement." Transitioning to secondary school (for ages 10-14) was "a little bit

intimidating” to George, though, as there was “disrespect” and “hostility” in this environment, with aggression between the teachers and pupils. George’s teachers saw him as “one of the cleverer kids” and he was often taken out of class to do menial tasks because the teachers did not know what to do with him whilst his peers were taught the stuff he already knew. The school did not have a good reputation. Through his antagonistic experiences and the general ethos of the school, the “teachers had become like the enemy” who were incapable of teaching him.

George attended another new school for his GCSEs, and he found the new school challenging. His peers called the teacher “Sir,” he struggled with his attitude towards teachers after his previous school experience and suddenly found the subjects more difficult. George had to work hard to keep up academically and eventually worked his way up to higher sets. George was never bullied, and he had a group of friends, so he did not feel socially isolated. However, he never quite fit in at either of these schools as he struggled to reconcile the different attitudes he faced and never felt like he fully “embodied the school’s ethos.” He found there was a social class division between the schools and struggled to reconcile his “working class” background with his peers who had parents who were teachers, had parents who helped with their schoolwork, and who ate “mayonnaise instead of salad cream.”

George’s sixth-form experience was more positive as he had “a different kind of relationship” with teachers; he felt they “treated us with respect” and were “interested” in his learning and as a person. He struggled with his Maths A Level but was not good at seeking help, resulting in poor grades. This was quite a turning point for George as he realised that if he wanted to achieve in life, then sometimes he had to ask for help. This “improved” his “attitude towards education,” gave him back his “enthusiasm,” and “encouraged the university application.” The school helped with the application process, but George was aware he had not done much extracurricular activity that demonstrated he was the “well-rounded adult” they were looking for, which made writing a personal statement difficult.

From an early age, George had wanted to go to university; he put this down to his confidence in his academic abilities and aspiration to be like TV characters who

had “good jobs” or were “smart.” He had seen his parents work hard all their lives with no wealth or business to hand down to him, so he felt he needed to “escape” and follow his ambitions by himself; he “could only see university as being the way of doing that.” He had never discussed university with his parents until he told them he was applying; they had no experience and could not offer any advice. They were positive about him going even though they did not understand his motivations. The night before he went to university, his parents gave him £2000 that they had been saving throughout his life, feeling bad that they did not have enough money to do the same for his younger siblings.

George did not find university as “middle class” as he thought it would be, and he enjoyed that there were people from “all different backgrounds,” though he did feel a little different from his peers as they had parents or siblings who had been to university. He settled in well to the environment, feeling “slightly more mature” and independent than others he lived with as he knew how to cook from working in the pub. He found the academic side quite “easy” at first, but he worked hard on the areas he felt he was behind. George did not get involved with much extracurricular activity at university as there was a sense of “financial exclusivity” and he was always “a bit skint” despite working during the holidays. He stayed connected with his parents, though conversations were mostly around social activities or whether he was eating well.

George aspired to postgraduate study but could not afford to do this and instead went into employment. He began working in the NHS in a mental health unit, which he found interesting and was not put off by the senior staff being “posh.” He considered applying for a bursary to complete the nurse training but felt this did not match his “slightly grand ideas.” He met a specialist at work from a more “ordinary background” who shared her experiences of the prison service and their financial support to do a master’s degree. This conversation inspired George to apply to the prison service, and subsequently, they paid for him to complete his master’s.

After several years in employment, George found he was “too much behind your desk” doing paper-based work with little further training or learning opportunities. During a conversation with one of his supervisors, she told him about her PhD experience, and he found her to be quite inspirational. When an opportunity was

circulated at work to study for a PhD alongside his job, George applied and was successful. His parents could not understand his interest in returning to university, nor could he discuss it with them. This led to some isolation. However, George had friends and colleagues with whom he could discuss the process instead. George was conscious that his educational level had the potential to be “disconnecting” or “fracturing” for family life. However, he felt this difference could be managed; “I need to just make sure that I don’t forget where I’m from.” Commencing the PhD was a positive experience for George, as it allowed him to develop his research skills, do something he was passionate about, benefit his work environment, and support others in their training.

7.2. David’s Story: “I don’t rely on their kind of support”

David is a PhD candidate who traditionally progressed through his ‘learning milestones’. David is male, aged between 26 – 30 years at the time of the interview, and has a White – British ethnic background. The following story offers insight into how David navigated his journey through a potentially problematic youth, seeing education as the only legitimate way to succeed. It highlights how he accepted that his family and peers were not on this journey with him and that not having them on the journey was a sign that he was on the right path to success. Despite this, he negotiated these tensions and remained present in university and home life.

David grew up in a “rough” town with his mother and younger brother; his father was absent, so his grandmother took on the role of the “second parent.” The area was high in “poverty” and “crime,” and being from a single-parent household meant that David had a lot of “freedom” when he was younger, leading him to get involved with low-level criminal activity. His mother left school with no formal qualifications and has worked in casual work – retail and cleaning – all her life, often relying on the benefits system for an income. Although less academically inclined, David’s brother did go to university but dropped out in the first few months, and he now owns his own successful business.

David had a positive experience in primary school; he was engaged with his

studies but also had peers whom he misbehaved with. His mother did not help with homework but always reinforced the “need to come out with the grades” and that education was “important.” David’s transition to secondary school was met with “a level of apprehension” as he began to experience a violent environment and realised that, being the youngest year group, he was “quite vulnerable.” Despite this, he did not find the work difficult, and he fit in socially as his personality meant he could be friends with his “geeky,” “popular,” and “naughty” peers. The school had a poor reputation and had been put into “special measures.” However, David was placed in their “gifted and talented” programme, which meant he could gain more GCSEs through additional sessions during the school holidays. The segregation between the sets meant that fights broke out, and David was often involved in this and other petty crimes on school premises. He maintained good relationships with his teachers throughout school, which he attributes to getting good grades despite being “naughty.”

David was involved with sports outside of school, so he trained multiple nights weekly. This kept him “out of any more trouble” and prevented him from following his peers and other bad “role models” into more serious criminal activity. David liked the identity that came with the sport, making him feel like a “star in a small fishpond,” as the people in the area respected him for it. He also enjoyed pushing himself and being successful in something. David had a promising career in the sport and was at the “top of the game” when he decided to give it up to pursue education. He felt it was “too much of a risk” to pursue the sport and that, instead, it would “be a safer bet” for his future success and earnings by putting his efforts into his education. Changing his focus meant that David achieved good grades for his GCSEs, but his family and peers did not seem to understand or support this change in direction.

David’s involvement in low-level criminal activity continued during college, and he felt “disinterested” in learning, preferring the social aspects of the environment. He did not get high grades in his A Levels, but he puts his continued engagement with learning down to his mother’s reinforcement that education was important. David came to a point where he wanted a “fresh start” and felt that attending university would allow him to move away from the “restricting” and “crappy town” that pulled him into a life he no longer wanted to be a part of. University was an opportunity for him to progress and develop, even though his motivations were

highly influenced by the social aspects rather than as a strategic career move. Whilst his family acknowledged that attending university was a good step forward, David received little support in applying or moving to university.

On arriving at university, David was keen to fit into the social environment and sometimes prioritised that over his studies. He found the initial transition difficult as he met people with “very different views and experiences,” which was very unfamiliar to him; however, this was one of the things he found most “interesting” about university life as he enjoyed learning from his new peers. At the same time, he regularly sought extra support when needed, as he was concerned about how others perceived him and his work. He was confident in ensuring he knew how to improve his grades, and he had a good relationship with his lecturers, finding that when he was ready to learn, they were there to help and support him. David worked throughout his undergraduate study to support himself financially, as he had no support from his family. He enjoyed his subject, and after speaking to his tutors, he found that if he wanted to pursue a career in that field, he would need to do further study, so he applied for a master’s degree.

David enjoyed the master’s degree but found it “more intense” and “the workload was a lot more” than his undergraduate degree, which encouraged him to “up my game” and rise to the challenge. Learning more about the subject influenced his career decisions, and with the potential for a fee-waived PhD a possibility, he worked hard and got “the highest overall” grades on the course. Due to some miscommunications, David did not initially get a fee waiver for a PhD, and after the master’s degree ended, he decided to return to his hometown to work in bars and clubs. This made him realise that his preferred career path was in academia, and he began looking for PhD opportunities. When he had spent more time researching and understanding the process, he applied again for the fee waiver and was successful.

Throughout his PhD, David was conscious of the lack of understanding and interest from his family and peers at home. Whilst this was sometimes frustrating, David overcame this by realising that “I don’t rely on their kind of support or needing to feel like they’re on the journey with me.” His family was hostile towards him because he was not there to support the family, and his successes at university were only usually discussed in terms of monetary reward. However,

he found solace because no one else he knew from his hometown had gone to university, meaning he was on the right track. David's partner financially supported the household so that he could continue with his career goals without needing to work.

7.3. Investing in Capital

In the following sub-sections, I will explore how this group of first-generation students navigated the disjuncture that arose within their social capital networks once they reached postgraduate study. I will argue that their elevated levels of academic capital led to a misalignment with their economic and social capital, which had the potential to cause conflict. As outlined in the previous chapter, academic capital can be understood as a form of institutionalised cultural capital (Naidoo, 2004) with both tangible and intangible components. For several participants, this academic capital, necessary for participating successfully in the higher education field, seemed to become asynchronous with the experiences and expectations of those outside that field.

On the one hand, their accumulation of academic capital became misaligned with their economic capital as they reflected on their peer's experiences outside of academia and their parents' expectations of life beyond undergraduate study. For instance, parents and peers sometimes prioritised earning money over further study. On the other hand, it also clashed with their social capital as they experienced disparities and distances between their family and peer relationships. For instance, language differences sometimes made them feel isolated from their families and peers. This meant there was pressure to actively reconcile the potential conflicts and bridge the distances that arose. I argue that their emphasis on building capital, driven by their pursuit of future benefits and the desire to contribute to the family, enabled them to navigate these potential challenges and prioritise long-term goals. Consequently, these juxtaposed worlds became more manageable.

7.3.1. Prioritising Long-Term Goals

Although they successfully transitioned to postgraduate study, many first-generation students experienced tension and dissonance in their new positions. Many employed strategies to overcome this disconnection as it arose when their pursuit of education became 'out of sync' with other experiences and expectations associated with acquiring economic capital. Firstly, this sub-section captures their conflicting feelings towards peers outside of

academia who have already commenced their professional careers or are earning a higher income. Secondly, it captures how conflict arose when their postgraduate study choices were not aligned with their parents' expectations of employment. In both circumstances, these first-generation students reconciled this conflict by prioritising long-term goals over short-term financial gain.

Comparing Selves to Peers Outside of Academia

Doctoral loans were only just coming into effect when I conducted interviews (2017-19), and the fully funded studentships, which were rife in some universities, were not common at my fieldwork university. Further, these students had little or no financial support from their parents. Thus, financial concerns became more prominent in discussions around postgraduate study, where they had not been for their undergraduate degrees. One of the ways that this disjuncture was felt was between self and peers outside of academia. Some found that continuing to postgraduate study, rather than commencing their professional career and having a higher income like their peers, led to conflicting feelings. In the following extract, Kathy compares her situation to those of friends she made whilst working in a part-time retail job. They had finished their undergraduate degree and gone on to 'better things':

Money is always, constantly a problem, and then doing a PhD and seeing all your friends going off and getting like, everyone's in a professional job, like all my friends ... were like right "I'm an accountant," "I'm a lawyer," "I'm a teacher," "I'm an architect" and like, I'm there like, I'm still in the same job I was in a decade ago, and they come in, and I'm like "do you need a carrier bag?" Absolutely wanting the ground to swallow me up, it's so humiliating, but I tell myself, I have to say, it's fine you're doing a PhD, it's okay – Kathy (26–30, Female, White)

Whilst seeing her peers succeeding in their careers caused some envy and embarrassment for Kathy, she balanced this by reminding herself that she was doing a PhD. Kathy spoke of the financial burden of her postgraduate endeavours by comparing her situation with the success and stability her friends had already achieved. However, Kathy reconciled these feelings of being left behind regarding financial and professional achievements by emphasising the value and significance of a PhD achievement. This highlights the complex emotional aspects of pursuing higher education, with the interplay between personal aspirations and societal expectations presenting a challenge. However, some of these challenges can be navigated by negotiating short-term sacrifices for long-term gains. Some made similar comparisons to peers who had not completed any university education but were succeeding in their careers. Joanne spoke about her situation relative to her peers and justified her journey as necessary for her future career goals:

I know of a few people who did accounting, but instead of going to uni, they did like an, I don't know if it's an apprenticeship, I don't know what it is, it's some kind of

training thing, and they are like the same age as me and earn like 40 grand now, and I probably won't earn that in my life, you know, but I'm not bothered because this is like what I want to do and I know I couldn't do the job I want to do without going to uni, so I'm happy - Joanne (21-25, Female, White)

Joanne discussed her awareness of peers who had taken an alternative route to achieve their career aspirations rather than attending university. Although she recognised the financial disparity between herself and her peers, Joanne showed less concern over her financial position than Kathy. Joanne's contentment was connected to her commitment to pursuing her career path, which she felt could only be achieved with a postgraduate education. This meant that she prioritised acquiring knowledge, skills, and qualifications necessary for her chosen career path and focused on fulfilling her long-term plans despite potential financial trade-offs. The narratives presented by Kathy and Joanne suggested a potential for conflict situated in the realm of their social capital; they made comparisons across their social networks, which had the potential to cause worry and doubt.

Nevertheless, Kathy and Joanne reconciled this conflict and their current sense of weakness in terms of economic capital by emphasising to themselves the future dividends that enhancing their academic capital through PhD study would bring. This recognises that short-term financial gain is not always the primary measure of success. Instead, there was a focus on fulfilling their long-term personal or professional ambitions.

As highlighted in David's story earlier in this chapter, he chose to pursue education (rather than sport) as it felt like a "safer" route to success. He further spoke about his choice to pursue postgraduate education in contrast to his brother's trajectory:

He [brother] could have done it if he had applied himself early on, but I think he always just wanted the quick buck, and he wanted to do it the easy route, whereas I was definitely conscious of the fact, like, recognising that the world we live in, it works kind of like a certificate basis thing, so regardless of what skills you have ... with that certificate comes a certain level of social mobility and you'll probably, you know, the reality is post-PhD you'll probably never earn below a certain amount of money. So it's a bit of like a safeguard, really; it takes a long time to get there; you do your degree, your master's, your PhD, but when you get there, you're probably never going to earn below a certain point, and this is the point I say, you know, he may, my brother for example who owns a [business] is earning a lot of money, much more than I would be earning, but if the [business] was to go bust tomorrow, he's got nothing, he's back to square one, has no qualifications and stuff – David (26-30, Male, White)

David was explicit in his perspective that his long-term commitment to accumulating academic capital (through qualifications) would provide a more stable future than his brother's short-term acquisition of economic capital. David depicted his brother as prioritising earning a "quick buck" and seemed to perceive economic capital alone as precarious, as it was contingent on the success of his brother's business. However, David perceived his

pursuit of academic capital as providing a “safeguard” for future financial security, which meant he would always have something to fall back on. David spoke further about how he knew that pursuing university was a “positive step” and “something that’s seen as successful” he explained: “The fact that I didn’t know anyone else who had gone to uni, that was enough for me to think it was a good thing to do and something that was like progression or whatever”. This highlights how he positioned university and the acquisition of academic capital to increase his social mobility and move beyond the generational tendencies of his home environment, an environment he previously characterised as lacking opportunities and financial security. Therefore, as David understood it, the fact that no one else from this environment had been to university meant that it could only be a good thing.

Contrasting Expectations of Parents

Another potential area for conflict arising within the realm of their social capital was between self and parents. The expectation from parents that undergraduate study would be a sufficient step towards better career opportunities and financial stability meant that a continuation into postgraduate study was not well understood. The tensions that arose seemed specifically located within the sphere of economic capital; parents expected that their first-generation children would now earn an income rather than continue their educational pursuits. In Chapter Five, I presented Lydia’s story, which demonstrated the way her parents firmly communicated the value that education could bring to her future opportunities. Later in her narrative, Lydia shared that her parents remained interested in her studies, but their lack of understanding became problematic:

I don’t think she understands what I’m doing now. It’s like when my journal got published, she, my mum, was like, “Oh good, do you get paid?” I was like, “No, mum, it’s not about that; it’s about the having research and that underneath your belt,” and she was like “, Oh, right,” and I was like, “Oh, cheers!” So, I don’t think she really knows, bless her, not a clue, so they’re supportive, but they actually have no idea at all - Lydia (21-25, Female, White)

Further, Lydia described how she sometimes argued with her parents during her postgraduate study experience. When asked what these arguments were about, Lydia responded:

Just like, “We’ve been working since we was 15/16 blah blah blah,” and I’m like, “Yeah, I get that,” because at, technically, I’ve never had a full-time job, so that comes into it. I always get compared to my brother in the sense of I technically don’t pay, I don’t pay any rent, erm, I do, and I acknowledge that they do support me in, I’ve never said that they don’t, but when I’m moaning about stresses of life and like “oh, blah blah” and they’re like “you have it easy, your brother had to pay this much as soon as he left school, he was working full time at doing his apprenticeship and

then working at Morrisons.” I’m like, “Right, good for him, but are you doing a PhD?” Like you wouldn’t be able to do a full-time job on it – Lydia (21-25, Female, White)

Lydia highlighted how her parents compared her experiences with their own and her brother's. Her parents emphasised that they and her brother had been employed, paying rent, and juggling various responsibilities since leaving compulsory schooling, compared to Lydia, whom they perceived to “*have it easy.*” Whilst Lydia acknowledged the support she had from her parents, she also implied that they overlooked the demands and complexities of pursuing higher academic qualifications. The focus on earning a wage and whether Lydia would “*get paid*” for publishing her research suggests her parents may have had a preoccupation with accumulating economic capital, with her mum seeming disappointed when Lydia explained the academic (rather than economic) benefit of published work. Kimberley (26-30, Female, White) also spoke about how her parents did not understand the complexities of doctoral study; she said, “*It’s kind of like they learnt what I did at undergrad, and they think it’s the same,*” and their focus was on questions like, “*well when are you actually getting a job?*” or “*what will you do? Like, what will you have?*” Similar notions were reflected in many of the narratives offered by these first-generation students; with postgraduate study came a deeper sense of disconnection between parents' expectations and knowledge of higher education and their children's experiences. Whilst Lydia challenged the comparisons to her brother and emphasised the demands of her PhD, Brittany challenged her parents' emphasis on immediate financial gain and acknowledged the disjuncture in their values:

We had a bit of an argument, and my dad said, “Oh, when I was your age, I had a job, I was, blah blah, what are you doing?” And it was that thing like they value employment and money, and what I’m doing didn’t necessarily reflect that right now; it reflects in the future long term, but “what are you doing? You’re bumming off a loan,” I guess that’s the only time it’s really jarred when you realise they still value having money coming in ... it’s that thing of them being completely away from your bubble and trying to bridge that gap is sometimes hard for things like progression, marking schemes, and just different things, you can see it just gone over their head a bit, it doesn’t really bother me because they’ve asked the question, they can have the answer, - Brittany (21-25, Female, White)

Like Lydia, Brittany highlighted how her parents emphasised the importance of being in employment and earning money. Yet, she stressed how her educational pursuits focused more on long-term goals and future success than immediate economic gain. Brittany further highlighted the challenges of her parents being “*away from your bubble*” and trying to “*bridge the gap*” between her own experiences and those of her parents. On the one hand, Brittany implied that her values differed from that of her parents (who were focused on economic gain), though her parent's lack of understanding did not faze her. On the other hand, Brittany

spoke further about her family's pride in her achievements and the importance of them for someone from her socioeconomic background:

It meant more to me when I saw like how proud like my parents are proud, but my grandparents, and just how much it meant to them; I think that made me realise what a big thing it was because, from a socioeconomic perspective, my grandma couldn't do hairdressing because her parents didn't have the money, my grandad went and did several jobs because he needed the money, university was never ever going to be an option, Then obviously my parents didn't go because it wasn't really the done thing ... typically people who have gone to uni in their generation were high flyers so, you know, I think that's when I realised that it is important, it's an important thing, because of how important it was to them, even if they didn't fully understand, you know, the ins and outs, they understood the general concept of it – Brittany (21-25, Female, White)

Brittany highlighted how historical constraints of economic and educational limitations shaped her parents and grandparents' experiences. Brittany felt her family was proud of her achievements because university attendance was reserved for “*high flyers*” in previous generations. Brittany's discussion of her family's attitude towards her continued education highlighted the complexities first-generation students face when navigating the higher education field alongside family life.

Section Summary

The pride in pursuing a university education seems juxtaposed with occasional hostility toward a path different from their parents. In Chapter Five, I suggested that many parents may have ‘bought into’ the meritocratic rhetoric about university; this meant they encouraged their children to engage in undergraduate study. Subsequently, these first-generation students have understood that ‘the goalposts have moved’ and undergraduate degrees no longer guarantee the rewards they once did. This may be one of the reasons for their continuing to postgraduate study. This downgrading of graduate outcomes was less well understood by parents, though, which may go some way to explaining why this sometimes led to frustration and conflict. It seems then that the continued acquisition of academic capital through postgraduate study had the potential to cause some tensions. The expectations and experiences of others in their social capital networks can mean that their academic capital becomes asynchronous with their other types of capital. However, these first-generation students have been enabled throughout their educational journey to an extent where their commitment to building academic capital means they are content in pursuing long-term goals and ambitions over the short-term acquisition of financial stability.

7.3.2. *Negotiating the Distance*

As touched upon in the previous sub-section, these first-generation students often felt that a distance had appeared between their family and themselves, between the field of their home environment and university life. Firstly, this sub-section captures how this distance was navigated by accepting the differences that arose with their elevated levels of education. Secondly, this sub-section captures their feeling of responsibility to actively manage the distance within their family environment. This gap is negotiated by acknowledging its reasons and finding new connections to support their educational endeavours.

Bourdieu (1977) refers to a 'field' as a structured space with shared rules, wherein an individual's ability to succeed is determined by the capitals they possess. Understanding the family home environment and the university environment as two different fields highlights how there could be potential challenges for successfully navigating the distance between them. Moving between these fields has been described as a type of "boundary crossing," which creates a space of possibility between the fields (O'Shea, 2020, p. 96). I argue that one's ability to navigate this space and succeed in these fields depends on the acquisition and appropriate investment of the necessary capital.

Accepting the Distance

What seemed widespread amongst these first-generation students was the acknowledgement and acceptance that their new academic capital levels differed from the cultural capital held by their families. The distance between these capitals became particularly significant during their postgraduate education as they and their families grappled with the differences in knowledge and skill. For instance, Robert (36-40, Male, White) described the impact of education on his relationship with his parents, stating that: *"the more I've done it [education], the further away I've got from them [parents] in terms of values and beliefs."* Yet, *"regardless of the arguments and the differences in attitude,"* Robert felt that he had a stable and loving relationship with his parents, allowing him and his parents the space to navigate these differences. However, Nina spoke about how her family's attitude towards her changed when she commenced PhD studies, which caused her to question her place in the new field:

It is strange, though, because, like I say, I am the first in my family to get a degree, never mind a master's, but a BSc; it were a huge thing just the BSc, but now my family have disengaged from it, they rolled out "woo she's done a degree, she's amazing" but now it's a PhD they're sort of like "eurgh you're one of them snobs now" and that's just the stuff I'm getting now at the moment, and I don't know whether you've experienced it, isn't it weird, because you're like "I'm not, I've not changed, I'm the same person, I'm just a little bit more educated in that I'm not

frigging ignorant” because that’s all education is, it’s a lack of ignorance, and sometimes, I wish sometimes I had my ignorance still but you know when they say to you “ooh I bought this lip gloss” you can go “ooh” you can get right excited about it can’t you, “oh wow, oh excellent, oh yeah Palestine’s not just been bombed it’s all right.” So what I think now, I wish I had my ignorance back, but would I change who I am now? No, I love who I am now - Nina (26-30, Female, White)

Nina began by explaining the sense of pride that she and her family felt when she completed her undergraduate degree. Yet, as she continued higher education, her family became hostile towards her accomplishments and began seeing her educational achievements as snobbish. Nina reflected on this and emphasised that she had not fundamentally changed but felt that her education had broadened her understanding of the world. However, Nina suggested that she sometimes missed the simplicity of her previous ignorance, where she could get excited about simple topics without the burden of deeper societal concerns. This highlights the complexities of these juxtaposed worlds where first-generation students are proud and content with their academic achievements on the one hand but, on the other, can be conflicted by the changing relationship with their families. Nina embraced her academic growth, evidenced by her stating, “*I love who I am now,*” but her family’s response indicated their misunderstanding of the significance of academic capital acquisition. Here, Nina can use her accumulated academic capital to legitimise her understanding of self in relation to her family. Similarly, Tara spoke of the distance that arose between her and her family:

I feel my family are very disinterested in it. I think they feel very alienated by what I’m doing, especially now when I am doing my PhD ... I feel really disengaged from them like I’ll speak sometimes, and my grandma won’t know what I’m saying, and I’m like, to me, I’m speaking normally, but to them obviously I’m speaking in an academic, I’m speaking in a way what they don’t understand ... so university is not, if we ever meet up, it is not a subject what is brought up, they don’t ask me what I’m doing ... I think that it really, at undergraduate that is something that really annoyed me ... and only like doing my research degree I’ve kind of took it upon myself like, well this is what I want to do now, this is the choice I’ve made, so yeah, I’m going to stick it out, and yes I am going to face the consequences on my own – Tara (21-25, Female, white)

Tara discussed how she felt “*out of place*” and “*disengaged*” from her family, more so during her PhD than during her undergraduate degree. Like Nina, she implied that she did not feel she had changed fundamentally yet described how her family no longer understood what she spoke about. This shift in how Tara spoke could result from her acquired academic capital, whereby the specialised knowledge and language of the higher education field were accessible to her but less accessible or relatable to her family. This difference in academic discourse presented a significant barrier within her familial relationships, leading to the total abandonment of discussions about her university experience. Similar accounts have been found in other research where it has been noted that students often adapted forms of conversation depending on their audience (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013; Lehmann, 2014).

However, despite the lack of engagement from her family, Tara was committed to her chosen path and accepted that she needed to pursue this without the engagement from her family. This suggests that whilst the new academic capital associated with higher education achievement conflicts with the social capital of their family networks, they find ways to navigate this distance. This highlights a shift from relying on the family and the support it offers (as explored in Chapter Five) to realising that pursuing education is now an independent endeavour. This appears to be a fundamental moment in beginning to manage the distance that grows between university life and family relationships. David spoke about this more explicitly:

I think I'm at a point where I no longer rely on; I probably hit this point whilst doing my degree, erm, I don't rely on their [family] kind of support or needing to feel like they're on the journey with me. I know some people their family are very supportive when they're doing their PhD, and it's part of the process for them. And they say, "I couldn't have done it without my family," and when they've finished, there's a big, so an example is when I finished, there was no family party, no one got me a card or anything like that, or the stuff you'd expect because it's just seen as so alien and I understand from their perspective it's very alien, so erm I wouldn't necessarily hold it against them – David (26-30, Male, White)

David expressed a shift in his reliance on his family, feeling that he no longer needed them to be actively involved with his educational endeavours. Despite lacking family support and recognition, David was empathetic towards their perspective by acknowledging that the university environment was “alien” to them. He acknowledged that his chosen path was difficult for his family to comprehend or relate to and accepted this as an explanation for their limited engagement. Such a perspective seemed significant for enabling David to reconcile any conflicting emotions he felt about the lack of celebration or recognition from his family.

Managing the Distance

In addition, some participants acknowledged that they had moved beyond their family's level of academic achievement but felt a responsibility to manage this distance. This brought a new dynamic to their close relationships; however, it was intertwined with feelings of isolation. Thomas spoke about having to let his family “go,” though he does not refer to a breakdown of the relationship, just that he did not feel he could keep them on his educational journey:

I think that's summat that everyone's got to contend with if you're the first, that you sort of just have to let everyone go in that sense, you know, my dad's like always there in terms of life ... he can't keep up, he can't follow, it's up to me or not whether I explain stuff to him in simple terms so that he can understand it ... which is fine, he's not got an obligation to keep up, you know what I mean, and it's good, and really promising, and nice that I've had to let him go in that sense, but you know, he loves that, and everyone that's been around me, even our lass, she loves the fact

that I can talk about stuff and she hasn't got a frigging clue what I'm on about, that's good, that's really good, but you know that's isolating in itself – Thomas (21-25, Male, White)

Thomas acknowledged that his father, despite his support and presence in other aspects of Thomas's life, struggled to “keep up” with his academic pursuits and the language associated with them. Thomas seemed empowered by his ability to engage in intellectual discussion despite others not fully comprehending the conversation. Although potentially challenging, the isolation seemed to be seen as a positive aspect by Thomas and those around him, highlighting the value placed on his educational pursuits. Like David, Thomas was empathetic, as evidenced by his explanation that his father was not obligated to keep up. Indeed, Thomas was agentic in taking responsibility for navigating this gap in knowledge. This acknowledgement that they have moved beyond their parents' level of academic capital is explicit amongst many of the first-generation students in this research. However, more implicitly, this may also represent steps in social mobility, whereby they acknowledge the implications of their increased academic capital on a broader level. In George's story presented at the beginning of this chapter, I highlighted how he often reflected on the social position of his family background in relation to his educational endeavours. Like Thomas, George felt responsible for actively managing his distance from his family. However, he offered a much broader reflection on their relative social positions:

I suppose in terms of family life, it feels like, you know, the potential for a divide, but you have to work hard to not alienate yourself, maybe not work hard, but it is a barrier between relationships which can be worked through, and it doesn't have to cause a problem but it is there, often unspoken, and because no one's done as much as an A Level so it does feel quite different ... I feel like it's up to me to not make them feel insecure or whatever. I think sometimes my little brother and sister, like, they're not intimidated, but they could be, and they, it just feels like, it's quite hard to explain actually, but I suppose I feel like I need to just make sure that I don't forget where I'm from and just be real, and it's not a big effort honestly, but yeah and I'm conscious of it, and I guess they are too and, but you know, all families have different dynamics, and this is just one aspect, a relatively healthy one – George (36-40, Male, White)

Implicit in his statement, “I need to just make sure that I don't forget where I'm from,” is an understanding that he considered his new place to be somewhere different from his family background. This could be that he considered himself to have found a place within a different social class, or at least that he saw himself as having greater social mobility prospects. George reflected on how his increased levels of academic capital had the potential to make his family feel insecure or intimidated in comparison. He negotiated this disparity by being actively aware, remaining connected to his roots, and being “real”. Despite his broader reflections on his family circumstances, George spoke further of the emotional toll this sometimes had on him:

When I told my mum I was going to do a PhD, I mean, she doesn't know what that is, but she her instant reaction was, "Oh, don't you think you've done enough education now?" I'm like, "Thanks, mum," so yeah, they're a bit mystified by it, and they don't really understand it, and sometimes that does make me sad, and I wish they understood it more, and so there's a slight loneliness because of that from the family, but you know, I have friends and colleagues who get it, and that's nice – George (36-40, Male, White)

The reaction from George's mother highlighted a lack of familiarity and knowledge about the pursuit of academic capital within the family. As a result, George felt a sense of sadness and loneliness due to his family's inability to comprehend and appreciate his academic pursuits. However, George also highlighted the alternative support from those who did share similar understandings and appreciation for pursuing a PhD. These friends and colleagues who "got it" provided a sense of connection and support, which helped George navigate the feelings of isolation within the family. This suggests that one of the ways first-generation students can overcome the disjuncture they feel within the social network of their family is by forming new social networks more aligned with their increased levels of academic capital. Nina further demonstrated this mediation of social networks by discussing her relationship with her husband. She described how she felt "couped up" in her home environment and longed to spend time in her educational environment with social networks more aligned with her academic position:

Luckily, I've got other academic friends who understand, and I'm sure you'll understand what I mean. My husband's not an academic; he's a plumber, and what he does is a skill. And I will say that what he does is a skill, and he's not stupid; my husband's not a stupid man, but ... he doesn't understand things on a level like I do, which is, so I crave to get back to uni because there's intelligent people, you see what I mean, I feel a little bit couped up – Nina (26-30, Female, White)

Section Summary

In this sub-section, I highlighted the isolation and alienation experienced by first-generation students in their family environment. To navigate and address this social distance, it seemed that these first-generation students negotiated, acknowledged, and embraced their new positions in the academic field that came with postgraduate study. Despite the potential separation from their social capital networks, they committed to accumulating academic capital and prioritised its acquisition. In doing so, they became empathetic to the distance in types of cultural capital between themselves and their family and established new social capital networks that were more aligned. This deliberate management of their social capital networks allowed them to maintain connections with their home environment while engaging with their new academic world. It may be that those who cannot manage this distance find succeeding in the new environment more problematic.

7.3.3. Investing in the Future of the Family

In the previous sub-sections, I highlighted how first-generation students navigate complex, sometimes contentious, relationships during their postgraduate experience. However, their ability to inject capital into their family social networks seems an important element underpinning their successful and continued participation. Firstly, this sub-section captures how these students recognise the significance of their accomplishments in supporting university attendance for siblings and extended family. Secondly, it captures how those with children see their achievements as crucial for shaping the future lives of their children.

Recognising Their Unique Role as 'Trailblazers'

In most of the stories presented in this thesis, there was an overwhelming sense of pride and accomplishment in their achievements. This accomplishment was often acknowledged in relation to their status as 'first-generation' students in that they recognised the importance of their achievements for themselves and other family members in the future. Of note, many discussed how their progression to university meant that they played a vital role in increasing the possibilities for their siblings to follow:

I don't want to sound smug or anything, but I felt really quite proud and almost a bit big-headed that I was the first one in my whole family; there's been nobody else at all before me that had gone, not just in my immediate family, but in my extended family, and literally I'm the start of them to go. So, I felt kind of big-headed that I'd managed to get in and that I'd done it and that kind of thing, but then, well, particularly the females in my immediate family, like my two sisters as well, they've always been keen to go as well afterwards. – Sophie (21-25, Female, White)

How Sophie spoke about being “big-headed” about her achievements could be understood as recognising and appreciating the academic capital she had acquired, acknowledging the specialised skills and knowledge she had that were necessary to enter and succeed in higher education. This narrative further suggests that Sophie felt her university experience was significant for the trajectory of her siblings, which is highlighted when she said, “I'm the start of them to go.” This demonstrates that these first-generation students understood their role as trailblazers for university attendance and became a pivotal source of social capital for their families. It echoes research by Gofen (2009), who argued that just being seen to participate in higher education may ease the way for future siblings, but further that the influence and encouragement of educational aspirations in others can produce a “slipstream” effect back into the family environment (Wainwright & Watts, 2019, p. 2). This promotion of the learning environment was evident when Brittany spoke about the way her experiences influenced her sister:

Me going might have swayed her [sister] to plan to go to uni; she asks me questions, you know, "What's it like?" And, you know, she likes to hear about the lectures and the educational bits of it more than the social, which is surprising. I think she'll make it; I think she'll go, I guess once one's gone, the others kind of maybe follow – Brittany (21-25, Female, White)

Brittany highlighted the interplay and transmission of capital within the family environment. Brittany's academic capital seemed to spark curiosity in her sister, leading her to ask questions and seek information. Brittany could share her experiences and knowledge of the university environment in a way that provided valuable guidance and support, potentially fostering a sense of familiarity and possibility for her sister. Thus, Brittany became a crucial source of social capital for her sister whilst simultaneously transmitting academic capital, which may be fundamental to building her sister's aspirations. This shows how capital is a distributed concept, as well as an individual one and echoes research by O'Shea (2015, p. 143), who argued that a change in educational status had a "ripple effect" with a flow of capital resources between the university and the family. This flow of capital seemed particularly significant for some participants, like Sophie and Brittany, as they felt that they had opened the door that would enable others to follow in their footsteps. Older siblings, then, can provide a "route map" allowing younger siblings to "orientate themselves successfully towards their future educational pursuits" (Davies, 2019, p. 221).

Also present was a sense of confidence in their capabilities and recognition of their unique position within their family. In many cases, being the only person in their immediate and extended family meant they held expertise and knowledge that was completely absent from elsewhere in the family. This suggests that they felt a distinct advantage in providing guidance and support for family members, and Kathy spoke about the moment she realised her unique position in the family:

I've had a cousin that's since gone to university doing an undergraduate because, literally, not even my extended family haven't even done like undergraduate degrees, and she kind of messaged me once asking me how to do such and such a thing, and I thought oh god yeah because I'm the only one that's done it. So, at that point, it kind of dawned on me, and with my sister, she wanted a lot of help with her access courses ready to go to university, so I think kind of with that, I kind of felt like, oh I've got this experience that no one else has got, and I can help – Kathy (26-30, Female, White)

Kathy's realisation that she had unique experiences and expertise highlighted the value that investing this back into her family could bring. The academic capital that Kathy had accumulated over time then positioned her as a valuable resource within her family networks, a resource that could provide guidance and support. This emphasises the potential transformative power of academic capital in breaking the cycle of earlier missed educational opportunities within the family. By becoming the first in their family to go to

university, these students expand their academic capital and open the doors for their siblings and future generations to access and accumulate academic capital for themselves. This seemed common in those with younger siblings but also those with children. This demonstrates how fields can “bleed into each other” where capital acquired in one field can add value in another (Watkins, 2018, p. 1244).

Shaping the Future for Their Children

The women who returned to education later in life exhibited a profound sense of purpose, driven by their desire to provide their children with opportunities that were absent from their own experiences. This meant that even when faced with challenges or discomfort in an unfamiliar environment, their commitment to change the direction of their family trajectory compelled them to persevere in their educational endeavours. Annie spoke about how, despite her disbelief that she had progressed so far in education, she found her postgraduate experience to be “empowering” as it enabled her to consider a different future for her children:

it's really important that, I suppose, take this as far as I can now ... because if you'd said six years ago and asked me, I wouldn't have thought in a million years that I'd be here doing, and I'm doing a PhD, which is ridiculous. I still think someone is going to send me a nicely worded letter going, “Yeah, no, not for you, we thought you were different, Annie.” Yeah, so it might still happen, and yeah, it feels very empowering, actually, and it's given me loads of opportunities to reflect on education and what I want for my kids because I am not like my mum; I am on it, totally on it, because I want them to not be 41 and trying to work, and bring up two kids, and do a PhD, and all that kind of thing because actually there's ways to do it and it be a lot easier, and I want that for them – Annie (41-45, Female, White)

This narrative offered by Annie expressed her desire to leverage her acquired academic capital to benefit her children, investing it to enhance their future opportunities. Whilst Annie suggested that she sometimes felt a sense of imposter syndrome, she buttressed this with feelings of empowerment and perseverance in her educational pursuits for the future benefit of her children. As such, shaping her children’s experiences and potentially alleviating the challenges associated with her and her mother’s social and economic circumstances became the priority and motivation for her continued success. It seems that these first-generation students considered the role of education to be about providing their children with a life different from their own, a life with greater aspirations, better job prospects and financial stability. This suggests that some saw higher education as an opportunity for promoting social mobility for future generations rather than an investment in their own instantaneous social and economic prospects. However, Nina reflected on the importance of her social mobility for the future opportunities of her children:

I always felt as well that there were responsibility on me because of the kids because I feel like I can give a better life with an education, which you can't you, you've got access, it makes you socially mobile. Education is the only way you're gonna get socially mobile, it's as clean cut as that because it's gonna give you a better job and job prospects then ultimately that leads to you giving a better life to your children, and also it's inspiring them to achieve, to want more for themselves, to want to achieve more, and like I say it's not for me, it's never been about money, it's been about the actually just experience of it, like for the children they can have totally different experiences to what I had as a child - Nina (26-30, Female, White)

Nina clearly stated that education played a pivotal role in improving future job prospects and, thus, becoming socially mobile. She asserted that her educational motivations were not necessarily based on economic gains. Still, she acknowledges that the economic gain from a “better job” could allow her children better experiences. Nina also emphasised her role in shaping her children’s aspirations by encouraging them to achieve and “want more for themselves.” Both Annie and Nina experienced difficulties during their compulsory schooling, leaving with minimal qualifications, and both returned to education some years later to re-commence studying alongside caring for their young children. From their stories, it seemed that this sense of responsibility for improving their children’s opportunities was the catalyst to return to education and the motivation to, as Annie said, “take it as far as I can”. On the other hand, Josie had a relatively positive experience in her early schooling and could offer a different perspective on her role as a parent. For Josie, it was more about setting a good example and being a “good role model”:

It's nice because you do feel like you've achieved something; I am proud of myself, you know, and I want to be a good role model; I want to be a good role model to my daughter and hope that she, well she wants to be a vet so hopefully she can see how hard I'm working and sort of model herself on me, but no, it is just a good ... just recognition that you work hard, you know, and you study hard, and you can actually get somewhere and, you know, like I said, I did work hard at school, I was clever, so I did well, so it's nice to be able to do something with that and say it paid off I guess – Josie (36-40, Female, White)

Josie spoke about her sense of achievement and pride in progressing to university and saw it as a testament to her hard work and ability to acquire academic capital. Josie felt that her academic achievements validated her efforts and confirmed that hard work could lead to success. She acknowledged this as important to communicate to her daughter to shape her aspirations and demonstrate the value of pursuing goals. It seems that Josie was proud of her achievements, not only for the external validation she received but also for the personal fulfilment derived from her educational journey. This suggests that the satisfaction from acquiring academic capital can have transformative power in personal growth and in shaping others’ aspirations.

Section Summary

By pursuing higher education, these first-generation students perceive that they will achieve upward mobility in relation to their parents. This intergenerational mobility represents a shift in social and economic status compared to their parents, with the potential for better job prospects and increased earning potential. Furthermore, they become catalysts for upward mobility within their generation and future generations. This intragenerational mobility means that they have the potential to experience upward mobility themselves and act as agents of change within their family. By being the first in their family to pursue higher education, they break the cycle of potentially restricted educational opportunities and become trailblazers, inspiring and motivating their siblings and children to strive for educational success. It is also useful to apply Putnam's notion of "bridging" social capital to these understandings (Putnam, 2000), as the narratives presented here demonstrate an active bridging between university and home. By sharing their experiences and knowledge with siblings and children, these first-generation students create a space of potential for upward mobility and enable educational participation.

Though there is no space within this thesis to consider gender inequalities in their completeness, it seems prudent to acknowledge that this type of educational work with siblings and children was, unsurprisingly, most common in the narratives of female students. This was of particular note when considering the parent-child relationship and supports other research that argues that mothers are most commonly more actively involved in their children's educational knowledge and aspirations (Brooks, 2003; O'Brien, 2007; Wainwright & Watts, 2019).

7.4. Conclusions

In this chapter, I have argued that prioritising the long-term benefits of higher education and the ability to be agents of change within the family environment were crucial mechanisms for participating successfully at the postgraduate level. In accordance with other findings, I have highlighted the potential for isolation and conflict within the family environment as these first-generation students continue pursuing higher education. Yet, this analysis contributes to understanding how first-generation students navigate and overcome the disjuncture within their social networks. As demonstrated in Chapter Five, the parents of these first-generation students fostered in them strong educational values and encouragement to attend university during their early schooling. As such, their experience of undergraduate study was in line with the expectations their parents had of them. However, the progression to postgraduate study was unexpected and less understood by their families and, subsequently, sometimes became a source of conflict. By recognising and reflecting on the significance of their

accomplishments, these first-generation students could bridge the space between their academic and family fields and navigate the circumstances that could potentially negatively impact their participation in the academic environment. This highlights how the disjuncture between their two worlds can instead become framed as juxtaposition; instead of conflict and disconnection, there is an acceptance of their simultaneous but contrasting worlds.

I have also argued that these first-generation students negotiated the space between the fields using their accumulated academic capital. Their elevated levels of academic capital become misaligned with the expectations of economic capital and the experiences of their social capital. This contributed to the above feelings of disjuncture between home and university. However, their pursuit of higher qualifications with its perceived financial and employment benefits and their acquired knowledge, skills, experiences, and understandings of the world enabled them to acknowledge the distance and appreciate their role in managing this. Furthermore, they understood their unique position within the family, drawing on broader notions of social mobility and their educational pursuits as possibly having a lasting impact on future generations. This contributes to understanding how capital is shared and invested in the family. They become a source of social capital for other family members, and their acquired academic capital (knowledge and experiences) can be shared and accessed by their siblings/children. This analysis also contributes to ongoing definitions of being 'first-generation' as it highlights how siblings can be just as crucial for capital transmission as parents. Older siblings with university experience can mobilise capital for their younger siblings. Thus, when considering a student as the first in the family, future research should include siblings under the same umbrella as parents.

8. Chapter Eight - Conclusions and Recommendations

In this final chapter, I offer a review of the thesis and my overall conclusions. I begin by reflecting on the extent to which I have met the research aims and evaluate this in terms of the potential limitations of this study. I then offer a summary of my key findings and discuss their value and the contributions these make to knowledge. Finally, I offer recommendations and suggestions for future research.

The aims of this research were:

- ❖ To explore how first-generation students navigate the educational environment;
- ❖ To identify the mechanisms that enable first-generation students to participate successfully in higher education; and
- ❖ To contribute to capital theory in the educational field.

8.1. Limitations and Evaluation

Throughout this research, I have attempted to represent my participants' views and experiences authentically and sincerely. Despite the luxury of space offered by a PhD thesis, the fact remains that 315 pages of 'data' were obtained from interviews with 30 participants. Being faced with such rich and detailed interviews meant deciding which aspects would be foregrounded and, naturally, which aspects would be omitted. My ontological position and conceptual lens directed these decisions, but my aims ultimately steered them. In particular, the second aim was borne out of my desire to focus on enabling aspects that positively affected engagement in education rather than focusing on the barriers and challenges of participation. As such, this thesis focuses on their stories of success, but that is not to say that the participants did not experience challenging circumstances that had the potential to bar them from participating in higher education. A fuller thesis of greater length could have included attention to these barriers and challenges. Still, I have aimed to represent their stories sincerely by using direct quotes and providing sufficient context where necessary; I tried to achieve a balance between representing my participants as fully as possible and producing a readable and accessible thesis within stipulated word lengths. For every quote or example I have used, I could have selected several other similar ones. Overall, I believe I have provided an honest and fair representation of what my interviewees told me (see Chapter Four).

My understanding of the phenomenon, and thus the data, was underpinned by my stance as a critical realist, outlined in Chapter Four. As such, I took the perspective that there were unobserved properties and relations between these properties that would result in tendencies for first-generation students to participate in education successfully or not. As

outlined in Chapter Two, my conceptual gaze (of capital theory) foregrounded the idea that certain resources and access to those resources were pivotal to success in a specified field. Thus, my interpretations of the data were bound to notions of the use-value of capital accumulation and the mechanisms this fostered in first-generation students' pursuit of higher education. Consequently, another researcher taking a different ontological and theoretical stance could possibly draw different conclusions from the same data (that said, I was subjected to recurrent questioning from my supervisors about the validity and reliability of the findings I presented and the conclusions I was drawing). The contingent nature of qualitative research findings and this ontology does not mean that my research has less value than that of another researcher. Instead, as with qualitative research in general, this is one possible way to situate these experiences within a wider context – and I have argued that my theorisation is representative, fair, and coherent. Readers can decide whether it is persuasive. My position has enabled me to make meaning of the experiences shared by my participants and deepen my understanding of the actions and structures surrounding them. It has offered value in terms of in-depth insight into how access to capital can promote educational success. Yet, it has also revealed how this process is complex and, perhaps, dependent on context.

My methodological choices (see Chapter Four) also impacted the type and quality of the data collected. Using a biographical approach to the interview complemented my critical realist position as it aided in seeing 'the bigger picture'; it looked beyond a snapshot of events as told by the participants and enabled a reflection on the level of 'the real'. The stories from this approach enabled access to seemingly trivial day-to-day events, such as family behaviours around homework and bedtime routines. Further, they revealed the contradictory experiences of emotions, support, structure/agency, and the ebbs and flows of their dynamic relationships over time. This approach also exposed how capital was constantly present in their biographies and impacted their decisions and life trajectories. However, I recognise that the stories of success presented in this thesis have perhaps been through several layers of filtration. Firstly, this approach relied on participants' memories and reflections on how they came to be where they are now, with the participants themselves selecting which aspects of their lives they felt were most pertinent to share in an interview lasting (on average) one hour and 19 minutes, and secondly, through my analysis and interpretation of the meanings underpinning their experiences and my constructions of their stories of success. I would argue that these conundrums are true of virtually all social science research that seeks to ask people about their lives. Nevertheless, this approach enabled the participants to consider their trajectories and attach meaning to their experiences whilst I, as the researcher, was responsible for situating these within the

broader and collective context. Furthermore, the biographical approach allowed me to evaluate the medium-term impact of their earlier experiences. Again, all PhDs demand choices; I believe my methodological approach was sensible and valid, but with fuller resources, one can imagine the benefits of a longitudinal, biographical approach to my research questions (e.g., by following first-generation students through their educational journeys to, during and after postgraduate study).

One potential limitation that must be addressed here is the context of the fieldwork university and the impact this may have had on the findings presented in this thesis; in particular, how the institution's culture, mission, status, and population may differ from others in the UK (see discussion in Chapters One and Three). The fieldwork university is a post-1992 institution in the North of England. In many ways, it is typical of these sorts of 'new universities' (e.g., compared with older, 'traditional' universities). These universities tend to be: more local in their student recruitment (i.e. students are more likely to come from the town and its surrounding areas); more likely to recruit students from 'non-traditional', working-class and 'disadvantaged' backgrounds (i.e. the sort often targeted by 'widening participation' policies and practices); ones that have students that live 'at home' rather than in college or halls of residence; ones that feature lower down league tables that rank the status and prestige of universities, etc. As outlined in Chapter Three, first-generation students and other groups targeted by the widening participation agenda are less likely to be recruited by or attend the more 'prestigious' and elitist Russell Group universities, finding the 'non-traditional' universities to be places more likely to have them and where they are more likely to feel 'at home'. As such, the fieldwork university is likely to have a 'less middle-class' (as George put it), less 'traditional' student population than so-called 'leading' UK universities. This probably has a significant bearing on my findings. Attending a more 'down to earth', less prestigious university is likely to have lessened the cultural chasm between home/family and university for the students in my sample and, possibly, provides some of the context that helps explain their success.

Of this study's 30 postgraduate research participants, 23 had completed their previous degree at the same institution. This suggests that, to some extent, they felt this institution was a place where they 'fit', where there was a greater sense of inclusion among the student and staff population, and where they could continue to achieve. For example, Tara spoke about how she felt everyone was so different in terms of backgrounds and cultures and how there was not a certain type of person she needed to be to fit in. So, similar stories and perspectives, as uncovered in my research, may not have been found at a more traditional university with a less diverse and inclusive population. This highlights the importance of the educational context for some of the findings presented in this thesis, particularly those in

Chapter Six. The nature of the higher education institution could impact the ability of first-generation students to access these meaningful relationships, and it may also go towards understanding why my findings differ compared to other research that has found that ‘fitting in’ was often challenging for ‘non-traditional’ students. This raises broader and more complex questions about whether certain types of students are more likely to succeed in certain universities, i.e., whether ‘non-traditional’ universities are a better ‘fit’ for ‘non-traditional’ students. It is quite feasible that this is the case, but arguing this as a policy agenda would seem to be regressive and further add to an already divided, two-tier higher education system. Instead, perhaps the policy question that findings like these should raise is: How can we ensure that ‘traditional’ and ‘prestigious’ universities are as accessible, welcoming and beneficial for first-generation students as ‘new universities’?

As outlined in the Prologue, one of the ‘big debates’ I have grappled with throughout my research – and in supervision sessions - has been the extent to which this thesis is ‘about’ social class. Despite social class not being the direct focus of my analysis, this does not mean that I deny or overlook its relevance and importance for questions of equality and social justice in higher education. Social class has crucial implications for a person’s opportunities and life chances. Class divisions are deeply entrenched; some enjoy long-standing privileges, and others encounter lasting disadvantages and blocked opportunities. As pointed out in Chapter Three, an enormous mountain of research has confirmed the causal relationship between parental social class (or socioeconomic status) and children’s educational outcomes. My study did not aim to add to this voluminous research literature on social class and educational inequality, nor was it interested in challenging it. Rather, without any *a priori* class designation, it selected a sample of first-generation university students and focused on the factors (forms of support, relationships, and capital, as it turned out) that were significant in their accounts of success in higher education. Undoubtedly, some of these factors will relate to the social class position and backgrounds of the sample (as some participants themselves pointed out), but boiling these down to ‘class’ would not be a simple procedure (the exact class position of some participants would be quite debatable) and, more importantly, would have had the potential to obscure the more detailed, intricate, complicated and participant-driven account of the ‘unusual’ success of these first-generation students that I was seeking.

8.2. Contribution to Knowledge

I think this research contributes to knowledge on several levels, both in terms of understanding the participation of first-generation students and in terms of wider educational debates.

Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, I have conducted new research with first-generation students who are postgraduates (so as to get a better understanding of how success is achieved). Research on first-generation students overwhelmingly takes undergraduates as the focus.

Secondly, the term 'support' has now become ubiquitous in discussions about the design, delivery, and experience of higher education. It is (or was) one of those 'buzz words' whose meaning(s) is less clear than its prevalence. In Chapter Five, I demonstrated what support meant for these participants and how it was enacted through their family environment. This operationalisation of the term was presented in a way that acknowledges that support is experienced and gains meaning *in context*. It is situational rather than absolute. The findings point to support as entailing parents valuing education and encouraging achievement beyond their own experiences, participating in school life, promoting extracurricular learning, and fostering intellectual curiosity. This support was experienced specifically within families, with all participants offering stories where they were, to different extents, *enabled* by the supportive mechanisms of their parental relationships. While some of the participants received support in specific ways – such as David, who spoke about his mother's pro-education beliefs as being the best thing she ever taught him – others encountered a more comprehensive range – such as Lucy, whose parents encouraged her to aspire to university, attended parents' evenings, and engaged her in reading practices. Regardless of these particularities, this support significantly helped their educational engagement. Notably, parental support around books and literary practices and the nurturing of interests emerged as crucial for fostering a curious mind and developing skills that would benefit the academic pursuit of these first-generation students. When parents support education, this enables their children to participate. In contrast, an absence of this support may inhibit the development and growth crucial for their later success in higher education. Putting these findings in such bald terms may make them sound obvious, but I think my thesis has added to our detailed understanding of exactly how this sort of support matters and 'works'. As well as parents, an additional strength of my thesis, I would suggest, is that it has pointed out how forming meaningful relationships with peers, teachers, and partners was pivotal for boosting academic achievement and cultivating the aspiration to attend university. While their parents remain generally supportive, these other relationships linked people to the idea of succeeding in higher education through critical moments and chance conversations.

Thirdly, this thesis further contributes to understanding the term 'support' through the lens of capital theory. I argue that support is a mechanism that facilitates the exchange of one form of capital into another, thus ultimately allowing it to have some use value. In other words,

when individuals receive support through their relationships, they also have access to many tangible and intangible gains. These gains are their social capital - that which can be obtained from their social networks. By leveraging these relationships – their social capital – they access other resources to aid their educational progression. We saw how Tina's mother connected Tina to astronomers in the USA and, subsequently, to the idea of higher education. We saw how Christina's teacher validated her abilities and encouraged her university application. We saw how Aaron's lecturer mapped a PhD project and promoted the development of his life plan and career goals. This suggests that support empowers individuals to leverage their existing resources to benefit them and transform them into something useful. The resources of others then become their personal academic capital, which they can transform and invest in their educational progression in a way that they find useful. Part of the mechanism of its value, then, is the 'cashing in' of capital; this, in my reading, had not been fully explored in the existing literature that employs capital theory to understand the first-generation experience.

Fourthly, another contribution of this research is the *long-term perspective* it offers from first-generation students who have been successful in higher education. This type of retrospective analysis, examining how these students progressed to the highest levels of study, is rare and reveals the dynamic and ever-changing complexities of student pathways. Analysis from this perspective uncovered the potential mechanisms that enable first-generation students to participate successfully across different phases of their journey. Initially, family support mentioned above during early schooling lays the foundation for positioning education as important and university as possible. While this support is essential for fostering a positive relationship with education, my long-term perspective showed that this alone was insufficient to ensure higher education attendance. This long-term perspective revealed as well, for instance, how these students' commitment to long-term goals drove their continued progression through postgraduate study. This determination proved crucial for managing the disparities between their own experiences and the expectations of their families and others. The longer-term, life-course perspective offered by my methodology has allowed me to identify crucial mechanisms that positively influenced successful educational progression and how they differed over time.

Fifthly, at the empirical level, I believe that identifying *new* tensions that arose between the university and home fields *at the postgraduate level* (rather than earlier) is a further new contribution of this research. The findings revealed shifts in parental support as these first-generation students progressed to postgraduate study. While parents had played a vital motivating role earlier, this changed during postgraduate study for many participants like Lydia. Her father's encouragement waned as he struggled to empathise with the stresses of

university life and clashed with her decisions to pursue further study rather than employment. While instrumental support during undergraduate study had been minimal, this was found to be because parents lacked the understanding of university processes, instead prioritising emotional support. However, at the postgraduate level, parents often actively disengaged from the process, and new tensions arose that had not been experienced earlier. Again, this illustrates the value of a long-term perspective for unveiling the complexities across the student journey. The massification of undergraduate study, with its promise of social mobility, meant that many parents expected their children to enter high-income graduate employment after their degrees. My findings point to tensions emerging when their children opt for further study instead, and their parents are unfamiliar with the benefits of pursuing higher-level study. This suggests that parents of non-traditional students are now more familiar with university attendance, but the benefits of transitioning to postgraduate study are less well-recognised. Whether pursuing further study was due to perceptions of changing qualification requirements in the labour market or a personal passion for continued learning, these first-generation students became invested in their pursuit of educational success, regardless of the lessened parental support and emergent family tensions. This suggests that a move to agentic action at this stage may be crucial as, without this, some students may not complete their postgraduate degree.

Sixthly, coming back to capital theory, this thesis suggests that capital is contextual, and its use-value depends on the individual and the situation. I have argued throughout this thesis that capital has a constant presence, accumulated over time, and can be exchanged from one form to another. However, the value and impact of these different forms of capital are not fixed or constant and depend on the context in which they are applied. In the way that economic capital can usually be exchanged for goods, its value differs over time and space, and it can even be obsolete in some circumstances (banknotes would have no use on a desert island, for example). The same goes for other forms of capital; they exist embedded in context, with their use-value determined by the context in which one is utilising it. For example, the reservoir of capital accumulated over time by these first-generation students may not be available to invest as fruitfully in a different type of university. The capital accumulated through the family may have had less 'cashing in' value in educational institutions where they did not feel like there was a 'fit' and where they could not make extended meaningful relationships. This adds to the argument that we should avoid thinking about capital as either 'high' or 'low' (usually determined in relation to societal position) – and towards understanding it relatively in relation to the value accrued by an individual in a particular context.

Seventhly, also in terms of theory, I have offered a synthesis of the concept of capital with the notion of critical moments, which provides a novel contribution to understanding the success stories of first-generation students. To my knowledge, this has not been explored elsewhere in the literature. Whilst capital theory outlines the types and distribution of resources that first-generation students leverage to navigate education, critical moments theory highlights the pivotal events that prompt them to draw on their resources strategically to make positive educational decisions. Social capital may play a crucial role in this recognition as the insights and support gained through these connections could significantly influence an individual's response to a critical moment. Synthesising these concepts offers a nuanced understanding of both the structural and experiential dimensions of first-generation educational journeys. This thesis has suggested that critical moments may be the mechanisms through which individuals actively engage and utilise their capital; this process is given little attention in Bourdieu's works. Further research is needed to fully explore how these interact over time and in different contexts and, thus, I only offer this as a potential way to synthesise two seemingly incompatible concepts.

Eighthly, and finally, I have added to our general empirical knowledge about first-generation status, further contributing to the existing literature and enhancing its richness and explanatory power. One theme concerns the role of siblings in capital transmission. In Chapter Seven, I explored how these first-generation students acted as trailblazers for their younger siblings by opening the doors to the possibility of higher education. They provided insider knowledge, guidance, and resources, which helped their younger brothers and sisters to think about university as part of their trajectory. These younger siblings accumulated valuable capital from their older siblings in a way akin to what others can inherit from their parents. Therefore, these younger siblings would likely experience a relatively easier, smoother progression to and engagement in higher education because they are more familiar with university processes and practices than their older first-generation siblings. Therefore, I argue that we should define first-generation student status as those whose parents *and siblings* have not commenced or completed a university degree.

In summary, I believe I have made a useful contribution to knowledge by:

- a) Conducting new research on postgraduate first-generation students in a field dominated by research on undergraduates;
- b) Documenting the value, role, meaning, dimensions and sources of social support that help enable successful educational journeys for first-generation postgraduate students;

- c) Adding to capital theory by showing how this support can facilitate the exchange of one form of capital for another;
- d) Using and showing the value of a longer-term perspective on the dynamic journeys of these students as they unfolded and how goals and commitment were maintained over time;
- e) Uncovering new findings about first-generation student journeys, such as the new tensions that can arise at postgraduate level between students and their parents;
- f) Theoretically, showing how capital and its use is context-specific – for instance, the nature of the university attended in this study allowed the deployment of students' capital better than might be the case in more 'traditional' universities;
- g) Synthesising capital theory with the concept of critical moments as a way of understanding how and when capital may be drawn on and used, and;
- h) Defining first-generation students in a way that includes their siblings, not just parents (and by showing the 'trailblazing' impact a first-generation student can have on siblings).

8.3. Recommendations and Future Research

One pertinent question in relation to the findings of the thesis and current government policy agendas relates to what the government sees as 'low value' degrees (DfE, 2023b). Many of my research participants had participated in exactly these sorts of programmes earlier in their academic careers. It would seem that some such programmes are now at risk of cuts or even closure. The government's proposals to place a cap on numbers and funding for 'low value' and foundation year degrees raise concerns about the consequences of this move for students who rely on these paths for their educational progression. The focus on curtailing 'low value' degrees is an attempt to reduce the number of students undertaking degrees that do not reap what the government defines as appropriate economic rewards five years after graduation. Blunt measures like these would seem to ignore the opportunity structures available to graduates (e.g., some local labour markets are more prosperous than others) and the different pathways that lead students to university in the first place. Reducing the range of types of courses available risks reducing opportunities, particularly for more disadvantaged and less 'traditional' students. In addition, the proposed changes to foundation year degrees will impact the trajectories of some more than others. They have served as a bridge for students who require additional skills before entering more advanced courses and have contributed to greater educational equity. Moving forward with these plans risks restricting opportunities and stifling alternative educational routes. As such, policymakers should recognise that students have different starting points and educational

backgrounds and consider the broader impact these policy changes may have on diverse and unique educational journeys.

At one level and in part, these government policy proposals seem to respond to the problem of graduate underemployment. In other words, there is a worry that the massification of higher education has led to a surplus of graduates and that some of the degrees that they have taken do not seem to reap the sorts of 'graduate dividends' that were previously the case, in days of lower higher education participation. Cutting 'low value' degrees signals a rolling back of this expansion. The neoliberal influences impacting higher education institutions mean greater financial pressures for many. As a result, institutions may choose to prioritise courses deemed financially viable, and there is a risk of marginalising disciplines that are less directly linked to economic outcomes but are nonetheless crucial to our understanding of the world. Further, doctoral students and early career researchers face increased competition, work intensification, and pressures to increase their skill sets. The emphasis on marketable skills and economic return has the potential to shift the focus of education and reshape the landscape of higher education. Such a narrow focus on economic utility may overlook the much broader benefits of higher education in terms of skill development, understanding of the world, and personal growth.

Whilst many of the participants in my study had hoped for better employment opportunities and social mobility because of their education, there was also an emphasis in their accounts on the personal, less material benefits it had brought them and the potential benefits to other family members. It is unknown whether these first-generation students have, or will, progress into the types of jobs that one would expect of successful doctoral students; however, their stories of educational success demonstrate an accumulation of skills and resources that are personally and societally valuable. This highlights the potential for future research to establish whether these success stories continue into the labour market. A follow-up study with these participants could consider whether their hopes had become a reality or whether they faced new forms of employment disadvantage instead, as hinted at in the literature (discussed in Chapter Three).

Considering my argument above about the importance of context for the utilisation of capital and the successful participation in certain types of institutions, comparative research could further contribute to these understandings. One such way would be to draw on a sample of first-generation postgraduates from higher and lower-status institutions to compare their experiences of participation and success. Would my participants have fared as well in Russell Group universities? Would students with long-term family experience of university be successful in any sort of university context? Thus, the potential interplay between context

and success could be clarified by exploring the experiences of first-generation postgraduate students from diverse types of institutions. Consequently, this may provide a richer understanding of first-generation success as it would scrutinise whether the findings I have outlined in this thesis are common amongst all first-generation students or whether this is more typical of those attending the fieldwork university and others similar. Future research should also consider more fully the voices of postgraduate students from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. In general, students from a non-white background are underrepresented in postgraduate research programmes in UK universities, and this was reflected in my sample, with only one participant who was not from a White - British background. This highlights how future research needs to address this underrepresentation of black, Asian, and minority ethnic students, regardless of whether they are first-generation students.

Finally, the most significant trend in these stories has been that *relationships matter*. Policymakers and educators can use these insights to develop strategies and practices that support the success of first-generation and other non-traditional students in their educational pursuits. There is potential for strategies that aim to inform parents and families of the benefits of their supportive environments, regardless of their ability to support the academic aspects of their children's learning. Educators could promote social integration in schools, building positive relationships with their students and encouraging innovation and knowledge exchange. Higher education institutions could focus on creating a more diverse student body and fostering a university culture that values collaboration and community building amongst students from all backgrounds. Such strategies should aim to increase the 'chances' of first-generation students experiencing the sorts of meaningful relationships and critical moments that can often be an important means of connecting them to the idea of university.

As a concluding remark, I want to note the sense of great pride and accomplishment that these first-generation students felt. They were proud to be the first in their family to commence an undergraduate degree, never mind a postgraduate degree, and had been empowered by their educational achievements. Their stories of success are inspirational and underscore the importance of keeping open the sorts of routes to and through university that they had relied on and benefited from.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet

Participant information

Enacting success: Understanding how first in family students are successful within the Higher Education environment

Version 3 01-Jun-18

You are being invited to take part in a research study exploring the experiences of students who are the first in their family to go to university. Before you decide to participate, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with me if you wish. Please do not hesitate to ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the study about?

The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of students who are the first in their family to go to university. This study aims to explore identity and the way that first in family students enact success

Why I have been approached?

You have been asked to participate because you have identified that you meet the criteria for participation in this research. You are the first in your family to go to university, are studying a Postgraduate course in the social sciences, and you have been schooled in the UK education system.

Do I have to take part?

It is your decision whether or not you take part. If you decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form, and you will be free to withdraw from the active research at any time without giving a reason. If you choose to withdraw after 12 months of your participation then it will no longer be possible to withdraw any information you have already provided. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your studies here at the university, including your progress and examination.

What will I need to do?

If you agree to take part in the research you will be asked to take part in the following:

Complete this pre-interview questionnaire which will include a simple task along with some questions regarding personal background information.

Take part in a one-to-one interview with me where I will ask you questions and we will discuss your responses. As they are semi-structured in nature I cannot predict the exact questions that will be posed. This will be recorded using audio recording equipment.

There may be other activities I contact you about in the future such as contributing to a Facebook group and producing photographs.

Will my identity be disclosed?

All information collected from you during this research will be kept secure and any identifying material, such as names or images will be removed in order to ensure anonymity. It is

anticipated that the research may, at some point, be published in a journal or report. However, should this happen, your anonymity will be ensured, although it may be necessary to use your words in the presentation of the findings and your permission for this is included in the consent form.

Anonymity will be assured unless you indicate that you or anyone else is at risk of serious harm, in which case I would need to pass this information to the relevant service.

Who can I contact for further information?

If you require any further information about the research you can contact me or my supervisory team on the details below

Sarah Ward (Researcher) - Sarah.Ward2@hud.ac.uk

Jane Tobbell (Supervisor) - J.Tobbell@hud.ac.uk

Chris Gifford (Supervisor) - C.Gifford@hud.ac.uk

Appendix 2: Participant Consent Form

It is important that you read and understand the consent form. Your contribution to this research is entirely voluntary and you are not obliged in any way to participate, You have the right to withdraw from the research at any time and without giving any reason. if you require any further details please contact your researcher.

- I have been fully informed of the nature and aims of this research as outlined in the information sheet Version 3 01-Jun-18
- I consent to taking part in this research
- I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the active research at any time without giving a reason.
- I understand that if I choose to withdraw after 12 months of participation, it will no longer be possible to withdraw any information I have already provided.
- I understand that withdrawing from the research will not affect my studies.
- I understand that my identity will be protected by the use of pseudonym and that no written information that could lead to my being identified will be included in any examination, publication or presentation. This may be breached if the researcher believes I, or someone else, is at risk of serious harm.
- I understand that the findings from the research may be disseminated through journal publications and conference presentations.
- I give permission for my words to be quoted (by use of pseudonym)
- I give permission for any photographs produced during the research to be used in the report with any identifying features made anonymous.
- I give permission for the researcher to access my Facebook page
- I understand that the information collected will be kept in secure conditions for a period of 10 years at the University of Huddersfield

If you are satisfied that you understand the information and are happy to take part in this project please click on to the next page, By completing this questionnaire and submitting your results, you are consenting to taking part in this research.

Appendix 3: Participant Biographical Information

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Programme	Previous Institution
James	21-25	Male	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Same Institution
Lydia	21-25	Female	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Same Institution
David	26-30	Male	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Same Institution
Joseph	26-30	Male	Black, African, Caribbean or Black British - Caribbean	PhD	Same Institution
Josie	36-40	Female	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	MSc by Research	Same Institution
Tina	26-30	Female	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Same Institution
Katie	26-30	Female	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Different Institution
Robert	36-40	Male	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Different Institution
Kathy	26-30	Female	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Same Institution

Lucy	31-35	Female	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Different Institution
Roland	46-50	Male	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Same Institution
Joanna	21-25	Female	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	MSc by Research	Same Institution
Tara	21-25	Female	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	MSc by Research	Same Institution
Christina	31-35	Female	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Same Institution
Jenny	50+	Female	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Same Institution
Annie	41-45	Female	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Same Institution
Mike	26-30	Male	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Same Institution
Thomas	21-25	Male	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Same Institution
Amanda	50+	Female	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Different Institution
Charlotte	41-45	Female	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Different Institution

Ralph	41-45	Male	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Same Institution
Nigel	41-45	Male	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Same Institution
George	36-40	Male	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Different Institution
Chloe	21-25	Female	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Same Institution
Rachel	21-25	Female	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Same Institution
Nina	26-30	Female	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Same Institution
Aaron	26-30	Male	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Same Institution
Kimberley	26-30	Female	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Different Institution
Brittany	21-25	Female	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	PhD	Same Institution
Sophie	21-25	Female	White - English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	MSc by Research	Same Institution

PARTICIPATE



Are you the first in your family to go to University?

Are you a Postgraduate student in the social sciences and were you schooled in the UK education system?

Are you interested in discussing your experiences?

As part of research looking in to the experiences of students who are the first in their family to go to university, I am looking for volunteers to take part in the study. Participation will involve a one-to-one interview as well as a pre-interview questionnaire and task. Volunteers will be compensated for their time with a £10 gift voucher.

Please contact me on the details below if you are interested in sharing your experiences

 Sarah Ward

 Sarah.Ward2@hud.ac.uk

 'FIF_Participate' or use QR code



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Appendix 5: Personal Background Information Questions

This page aims to collect some personal background information from you. All questions on this page are required to proceed and please aim to answer all questions as accurately as you can.

Question 23, 24 & 25 have a 'prefer not to say' option if you do not wish to give this information.

21. Full name Required

22. Email address Required

23. Age Required

- 21-25
- 26-30
- 31-35
- 36-40
- 41-45
- 46-50
- 50+
- Prefer not to say

24. Gender Required

- Male
- Female
- Other
- Prefer not to say

a. If you selected Other, please specify:

25. Ethnicity Required

- English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
- Irish
- Gypsy or Irish Traveller
- White and Black Caribbean
- White and Black African
- White and Asian
- Indian
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi
- Chinese
- African
- Caribbean
- Arab
- Other
- Prefer not to say

a. If you selected Other, please specify:

26. Course you are currently on Required

- Taught MA/MSc
- MSc by Research
- PhD

27. Subject Area Required

- Psychology

- Sociology
- Social Work and Social Policy
- Politics and International Studies
- Criminology/Criminal Justice
- Nursing and Midwifery
- Public Health

28. Which institution did you complete your previous degree at? Required

29. Please confirm that you: 1. Are the first in your immediate family to go to university (no siblings or parents have attended a Higher Education institution before you), 2. Were schooled in the UK schooling system, 3. Are studying a non-vocational Postgraduate course
Required

- Yes

Thank you

Thank you for completing the first step in participating in my research. Please go to the Doodle link below to book an interview slot.

<https://doodle.com/poll/pwqukbe82m86v994>

Appendix 6: Cueing Exercise Question

Task instructions

There are 20 blank answer boxes below, please write 20 answers to the simple question 'Who am I?' in these blank spaces. Please give 20 different answers to this question using words or phrases that begin with 'I am...'. Give answers as though you were talking to yourself, be as honest as you can, and answer in the order that they occur - Do not worry about ordering them in a logical way or by importance. These statements may range from emotions and attitudes to relationships and membership, from in the moment thoughts to longer term ideas - There is no right or wrong answer as long as it is true.

1. I am...

2. I am...

3. I am...

4. I am...

5. I am...

6. I am...

7. I am...

8. I am...

9. I am...

10. I am...

11. I am...

12. I am...

13. I am...

14. I am...

15. I am...

16. I am...

17. I am...

18. I am...

19. I am...

20. I am...

Appendix 7: Interview Schedule

Family Background

- Family household and location
 - Where did you grow up and who did you live with?
 - How did you feel about living there?
- Wider family
 - Who else in your family did you spend time with?
 - Did you have lots of family around?
- Family occupation
 - What do your immediate family do for jobs?
 - Have they always done the same jobs?
 - Do they enjoy their jobs?
- Family qualifications
 - What qualifications do your immediate family have?
 - Did they enjoy school/education?

Primary School

- Narrative and memories
 - Can you tell me about your memories of primary school?
 - What did you like and dislike?
- Family engagement
 - How was school discussed at home?
- Friendships
 - What were your friends like at primary school?
- Hobbies/Activities outside school
 - What hobbies or activities did you do outside of school?
 - How did you get in to them?
 - How did your parents encourage you to do them?
 - Where did your parents take you?
 - Where did you go on holiday?

Secondary School

- Narrative and memories
 - Tell me about your move to secondary school?
 - What did you feel and think?
- School life
 - Tell me about your subjects, which did you like and dislike?
 - Who helped you with your homework/exams/revision?
 - Did your parents offer you guidance?
 - How clever did you think you were?
 - Did your parents go to parents evening?
- Friendships
 - How important were your friends at secondary school?
 - Tell me about them?
 - Are you still friends?

- Hobbies/Activities outside school
 - What hobbies/activities did you do outside of school?
 - Did these change from when you were younger?
 - Were you aware of what other opportunities were available to you?
- Leaving school
 - What did you want to do when you left school? Why?
 - Did you understand how to become a.....?
 - What were your friend's ambitions?
 - What were your parent's thoughts?
 - Were your friends/family a big influence on you?

College

- Narrative and Memories
 - Tell me about your move to college?
 - How capable did you think you were?
 - What did you like and dislike?
- Qualifications
 - What qualifications did you do?
 - Why did you choose them?
- Friends and Family
 - Tell me about how your family and friends fit in to your life at college?
 - Did you have the same friends?
 - Who did you most identify with?
 - Did your family discuss your work with you?
- Going to university
 - How did you get from there to university?
 - Could you see yourself at university?

University

- Influences
 - Who influenced your decision to go to university?
 - Did your friends go to university? What did they think?
 - Tell me about how your family were involved in the process?
- Narrative and memories
 - Tell me about when you first went to university?
 - Was it like you thought it would be?
- Navigating university
 - Did you feel like you fit in?
 - Did you actively manage this?
 - How did you make friends?
 - What activities did you join in with?
 - How did you know what to do in university?
 - Tell me about your first assignment? Did you feel capable?
 - How did relationships work with tutors, lecturers, and other staff?
 - How did your friends and family support you? Example
- Finances
 - How did you fund your degree?
 - Did your parents support you financially?

- Did you have a job? How much time did you spend there?
 - Was money a concern to you?
 - Have you always felt that way?
 - How do you feel about the debt now?
- Aspirations
 - What did you want to do after your undergraduate degree?
 - Did you know how to do that?
 - How did you get to where you are now?
 - What are you doing now?

Appendix 8: Receipt of Payment



Confirmation – Receipt of Payment

	Name	Signed	Date
I (Researcher) confirm that I have given the participant a £10 voucher			
I (Participant) confirm that I have received a £10 voucher from the researcher			

Appendix 9: Example of Narrative Construction

An example taken from Lucy’s Story (section 5.1):

Lucy found primary school “a really positive experience” because it was “unstructured” and she could express herself creatively. She particularly enjoyed learning that was more “hands-on”, like science and geography and had a passion for English due to her grandparents encouraging her to read. Reading practices were also promoted at school, and Lucy was “praised at school” for her high “reading ability” and encouraged to read more advanced books. Lucy’s grandmother helped her with homework and reading regularly; her parents did when they had time. Lucy struggled with Maths and would put pressure on herself when she found it challenging. Lucy’s parents had grand expectations of her academically and often told Lucy that they wished they had gone to university when they were her age. When visiting her mother’s workplace one time, Lucy’s mother told her colleagues that “she’s doing well at school you know, she won’t be working in a factory when she gets older.”

The interpretation of Lucy’s transcript is constructed as a story in the following way:

Excerpts from Lucy’s Transcript	Formation of Lucy’s Story
<p><i><u>I just remember primary school being a really positive experience, there was just always so much to do, but I remember it being really free ... so if we were interested in something, I remember one year us being really interested in pirates and ships and whatever. The teachers used to let you <u>build</u> a puppet show about it and then you’d come into class and <u>show</u> your puppet show, and then you could do a <u>play</u>, and you could <u>draw</u> pictures about it, and yea, <u>it was really, really free-flow, quite unstructured really, but I remember that</u></u></i></p>	<p>Lucy found primary school “a really positive experience” because it was “unstructured” and she could express herself creatively...</p>

<p><i><u>being really positive</u>, that was a really positive thing because there wasn't like pressure, you know.</i></p>	
<p><i>I used to love that, anything exploratory, I remember when we used to, I suppose you could call it geography, but we used to do quite a lot <u>about the local community, walk around, we'd go out with the teachers, count the cars, mark off the colours of the cars, and things as they were driving past. We used to go to the local library, Christingle at Christmas, we used to go out with big cylinders and collect rain and then you know talk about that, and talk about clouds and rain and evaporation and stuff like that, so yea, a lot of it, I don't know maybe I'm just thinking about this now, I suppose I tended to engage with stuff that was more hands-on maybe, do you know what I mean, I were out there doing it, it interested me, you know.</u></i></p>	<p>...She particularly enjoyed learning that was more "hands-on", like science and geography...</p>
<p><i>...<u>loved English</u> like from a very early age, loved being read to, <u>my grandma used to read to me a lot</u>, my mum and dad used to read to me a lot, it was just something that, you know what I mean, <u>like something that I really, really enjoyed ... I remember that, being really praised at school as well, particularly my reading ability and things because they used to, there was like a little group of us that, because we had like <u>advanced reading skills</u> that they'd identified we'd go off into the library ourselves as a group and they used to do like little activities and things and we'd be able to you know <u>get the harder reading</u></u></i></p>	<p>...and had a passion for English due to her grandparents encouraging her to read. Reading practices were also promoted at school, and Lucy was "praised at school" for her high "reading ability" and encouraged to read more advanced books...</p>

<p><u>books</u> that used to have a little black sticker on them and then, you know, read those as well. So, <u>it was something that they really encouraged at school as well but like I say, my grandma, she always used to read to us</u>, to me and my cousins that used to go down to my grandmas as well, because I had three cousins that used to go, so we always, like I say, <u>it was just something that was really encouraged sort of a love of reading</u></p>	
<p>I keep going back to my grandma because my mum and dad worked long hours, it was my mum and dad and my grandma mainly that used to do that, my grandad didn't always have the patience because there were lots of us going in and out of their house all the time, but yea, <u>it was very much my grandma who used to spend a lot of time, and like I say, my mum and dad used to spend the time that they could, you know, with me and my sister reading and things like that and doing homework.</u></p>	<p>...Lucy's grandmother helped her with homework and reading regularly; her parents did when they had time...</p>
<p>In terms of <u>maths, ooh that was always a sticking point for me ... I don't know why and I really can't put my finger on why, as time, as time went on it just really upset me, maths, just like, I had a complete "I can't do it, I can't do it, I can't do it" and I don't know whether or not I were putting that pressure on myself or what, but I just got to a point where it used to really upset me.</u></p>	<p>...Lucy struggled with Maths and would put pressure on herself when she found it challenging...</p>
<p>She didn't really enjoy it, I didn't get the impression when I was younger, in fact actually, I remember sometimes I used to walk from school, when I was at high</p>	<p>...Lucy's parents had grand expectations of her academically and often told Lucy that they wished they had gone to university when they were her age. When visiting her</p>

school, I used to walk from school into the centre of [Town] and meet my mum, like after work, and we'd walk home and sometimes I'd sort of go in and see what she were doing and just say hello, and I remember her saying to the girls in the factory once "Oh this is Lucy, this is my daughter Lucy" and just introducing me to everybody and then her saying "Lucy won't be working here, Lucy won't work here, you know, she's doing well at school, you know, she won't be working in a factory when she gets older."

The situations at the time just didn't allow for them to be able to do what they wanted to do, and I suppose, like I say when I've spoken to them now about it, you know, "we just wanted to just give you every opportunity to do the best you can so that you can do a job that you want to do" and like my mum used to say, I suppose going back to the first points in the interview, "not end up like me working in a factory" do you know what I mean? That's what my mum especially used to say and my dad used to say "I wish I'd gone to university" ... looking back on it now I think he wishes that he'd have done more and completed more so I suppose they saw that by encouraging me and placing that high value on education that it, do you know what I mean? That'd be a good thing and I would be able to do what I wanted to do and I wouldn't be stuck like they felt at the time.

mother's workplace one time, Lucy's mother told her colleagues that "she's doing well at school you know, she won't be working in a factory when she gets older."